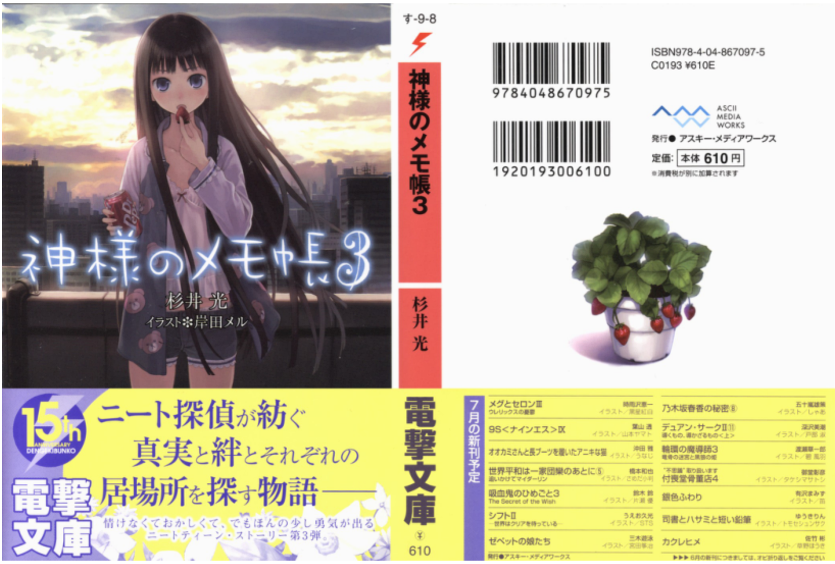
神様のメモ帳3

杉井光

イラスト✻岸田メル

電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations


神様のメモ帳3
杉井 光
イラスト✻岸田メル
15th ANNIVERSARY DENGEKIBUNKO
電撃文庫
ニート探偵が紡ぐ
真実と絆とそれぞれの
居場所を探す物語——
情けなくておかしくて、でもほんの少し勇気が出る
ニートティーン・ストーリー第3弾
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The Secret of the Wish
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銀色ふわり
司書とハサミと短い鉛筆
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杉井（すぎい） 光（ひかる）

1978年、東京生まれ。引っ越しを生涯で三回経験しているが、すべて同じ市内で、新住所をひとに教えるたびにつっこまれる。いいじゃないか市内で引っ越したって。僕はこの街を愛しているのです。でも郷土かるたは暗記してません（市民の義務なんだそうです）。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女
火目の巫女 巻ノ二
火目の巫女 巻ノ三
神様のメモ帳
神様のメモ帳2
神様のメモ帳3
さよならピアノソナタ
さよならピアノソナタ2

イラスト：岸田（きしだ）メル

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは http://maigo.jp/

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神様（かみさま）のメモ帳（ちょう）3

　彩夏が戻ってきた。冬の事件の後遺症で、僕との過去をみんな忘れて——。

　ぎこちない関係のまま、僕らが昔通りの園芸部の活動を再開した矢先、僕は生徒会長に呼び出される。

「園芸部は廃部にするから」

　廃部の理由である、設立時のうさんくさい経緯を調べていくうちに、四年前の不可解な生徒死亡事件が浮かび上がる。その容疑者は、テツ先輩だった。口を噤み協力を拒否するテツ先輩とニート探偵団を敵に回しアリスと僕は捜査を始める。

　はたして事件の真相は、そして彩夏と僕の居場所である園芸部の存続は？

　緊迫のニートティーン・ストーリー、第３弾！

神様のメモ帳3
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神様のメモ帳3

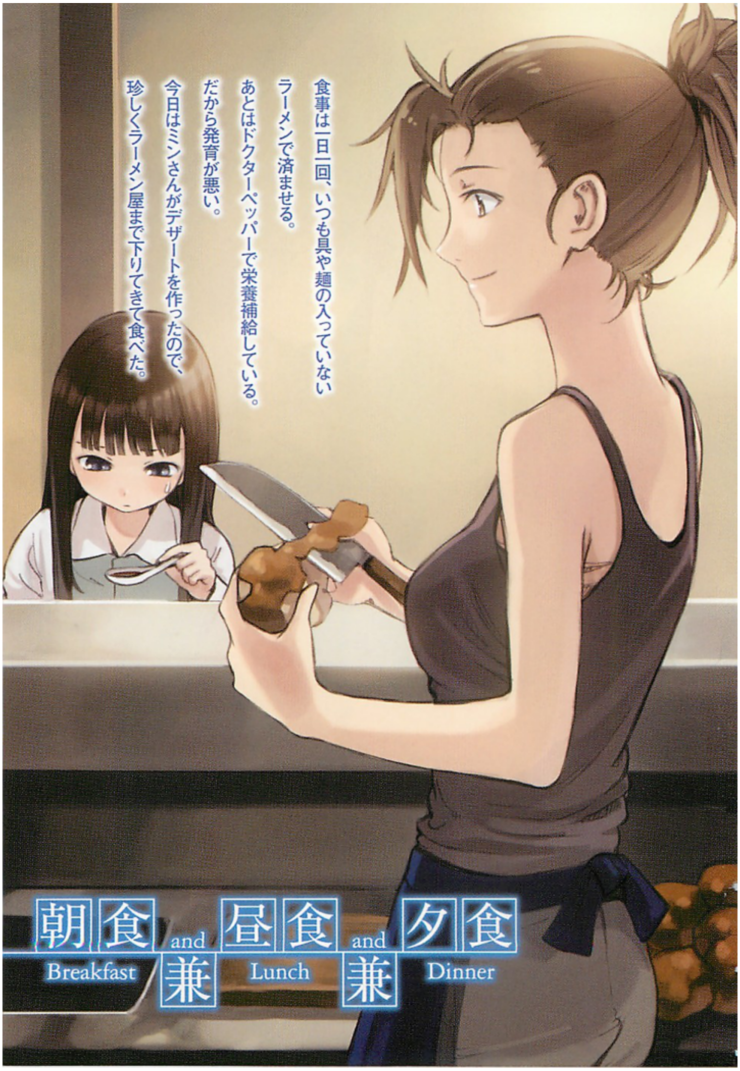
杉井 光

イラスト✿岸田メル

『探偵アリスの一日』by 藤島鳴海

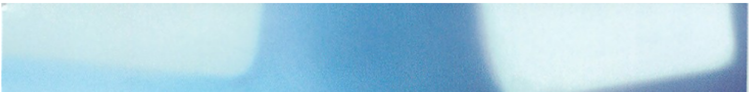
アリスはひきこもりの私立探偵である。
睡眠時間はおよそ一時間というハードボイルド（?）っぷり。
その一日は、だいたい夕方五時くらいに始まる。

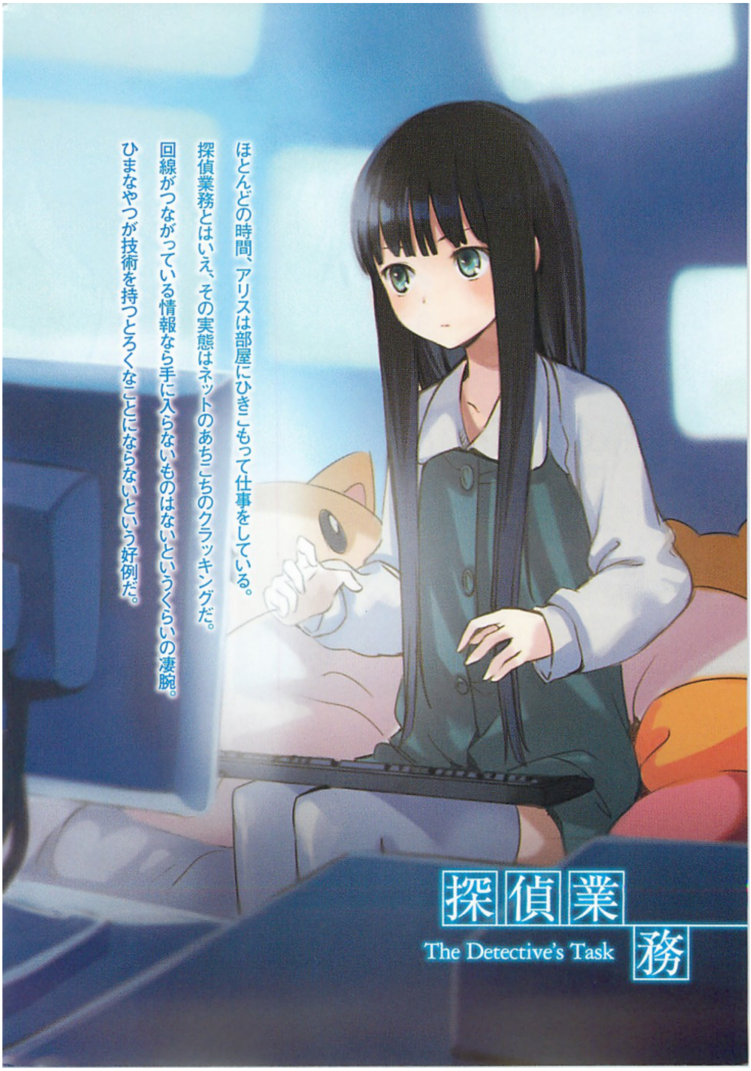
起床 Get Up



食事は一日一回、いつも具や麺の入っていない
ラーメンで済ませる。
あとはドクターペッパーで栄養補給している。
だから発育が悪い。
今日はミンさんがデザートを作ったので、
珍しくラーメン屋まで下りてきて食べた。

朝食 Breakfast
and
兼
昼食 Lunch
and
兼
夕食 Dinner

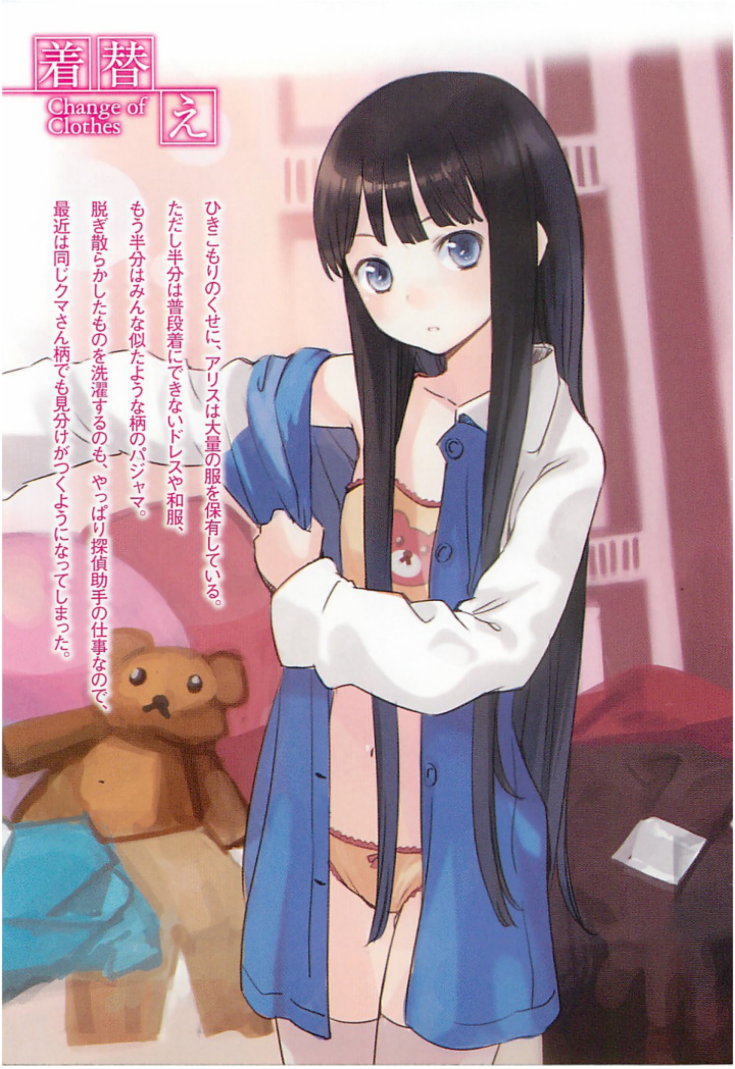




ほとんどの時間、アリスは部屋にひきこもって仕事をしている。
探偵業務とはいえ、その実態はネットのあちこちのクラッキングだ。
回線がつながっている情報なら手に入らないものはないというくらいの凄腕。
ひまなやつが技術を持つとろくなことにならないという好例だ。

探偵業務

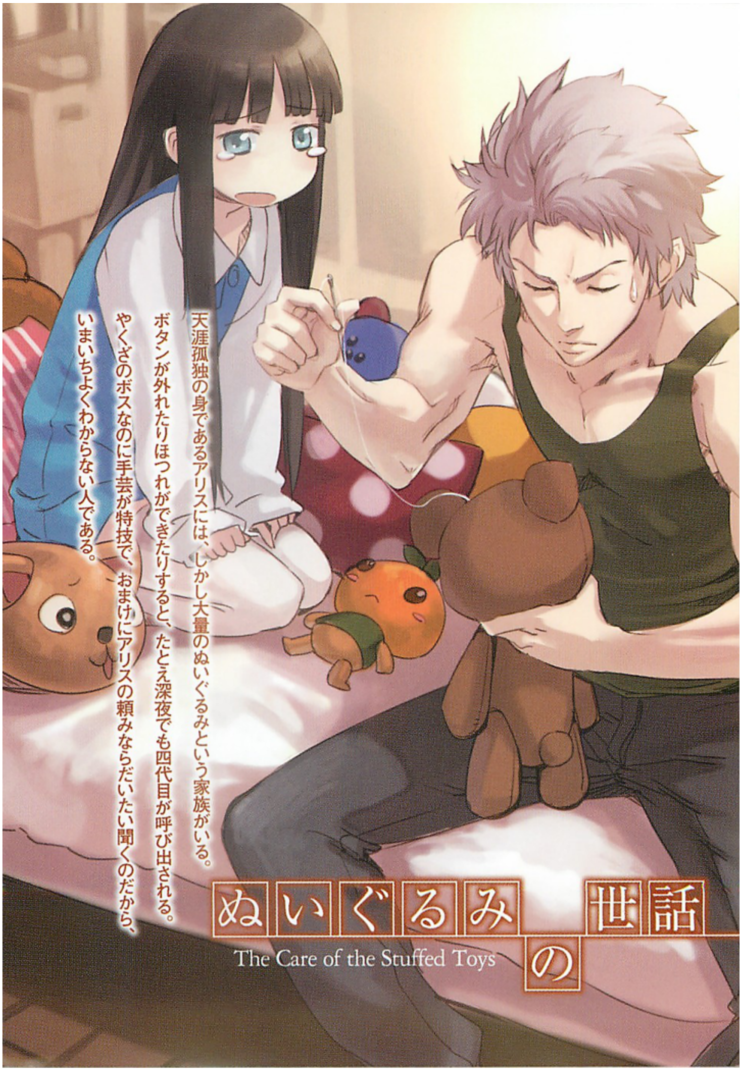
The Detective's Task



着替え

Change of Clothes

ひきこもりのくせに、アリスは大量の服を保有している。
ただし半分は普段着にできないドレスや和服、
もう半分はみんな似たような柄のパジャマ。
脱ぎ散らかしたものを洗濯するのも、やっぱり探偵助手の仕事なので、
最近は同じクマさん柄でも見分けがつくようになってしまった。



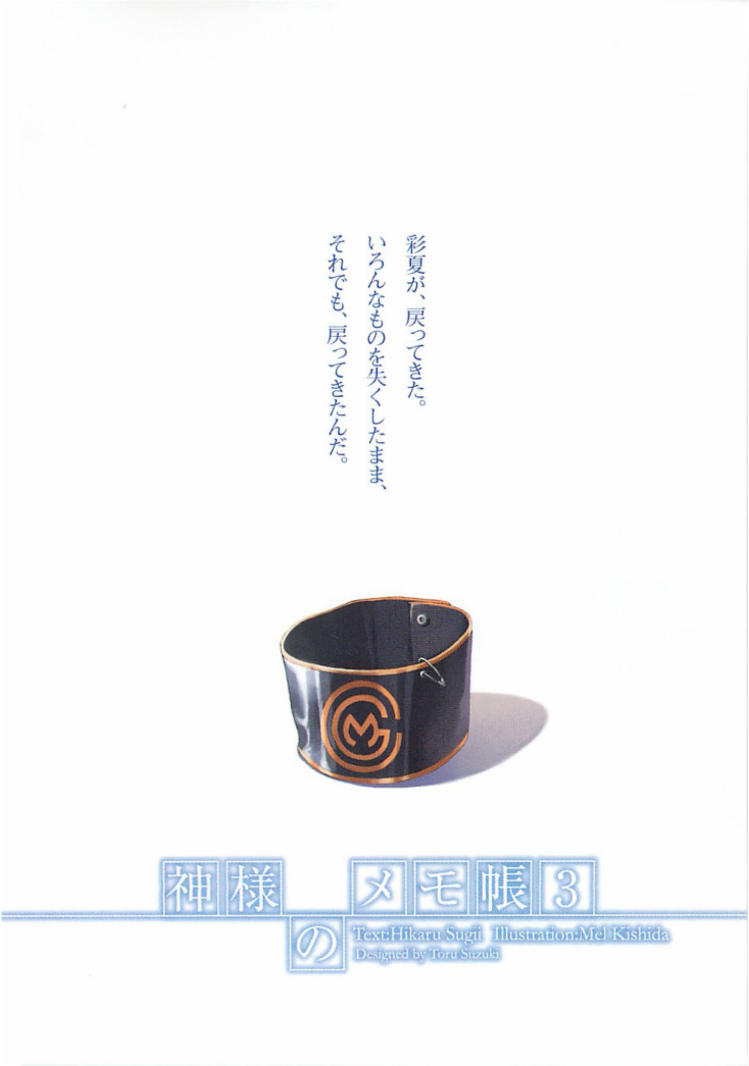
天涯孤独の身であるアリスには、しかし大量のぬいぐるみという家族がいる。
ボタンが外れたりほつれができたりすると、たとえ深夜でも四代目が呼び出される。
やくざのボスなのに手芸が特技で、おまけにアリスの頼みならだいたい聞くのだから、
いまいちよくわからない人である。

ぬいぐるみの世話

The Care of the Stuffed Toys

お風呂
Bathing

アリスは風呂が大きらいだ。
ひとりでは風呂に入れないので、
ミンさんの手が空いているときに
一緒にシャワーを浴びるくらい。
そんなアリスも、最近は仮眠の前にちゃんと
入浴するようになった。
風呂に入れる役目のやつが、
戻ってきたからだ。そう――



彩夏が、戻ってきた。
いろんなものを失くしたまま、
それでも、戻ってきたんだ。

神様のメモ帳3

Text:Hikaru Sugii Illustration:Mel Kishida
Designed by Toru Suzuki

Ayaka has returned. Many things have happened, but still, she returned.

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. --Daniel 12:2.

Chapter 1

When I pushed the rooftop door open, wind reached the dark, dusty stairs and my eyes met the clay-colored light of the sky. It was as though the silhouettes of the buildings shot right through the dark clouds. The ramen shop and detective agency where I worked at was in this five floors high building, though it was only five floors high, the landscape was completely different to the view from the ground and the view from the school's rooftop.

"Narumi, stop spacing out. Quick, look at the state of the planters."

After saying that, I was pushed from the back. Stepping out to the cramped rooftop, I looked around but there didn't seem to be anything on the bare concrete floor, so I turned around and asked:

"Where are they?"

The girl with a teddy bear under her arm, wearing light-blue pajamas and having long black hair that formed a shawl around her shoulders pointed at the ceiling above the staircase.

"Up there. It's where they get the most sunlight."

"Oh…"

I climbed the metal ladder and looked at the small concrete roof. Long and narrow plastic pots were lined up there. Above the soil there were narrow stems interweaving with leaves, and glossy bright red fruits dangling from them. Strawberries.

"They look ripe enough to eat."

I bent down to look at the door and report to Alice from between my legs, while she shoved a metal bowl into my nose.

"Well then, pick them. And take care of the stumps after that while you're at it. You're in the gardening club after all, right?"

Apparently Min-san’s growing method was good, since the harvest was quite plentiful. There were like, around a hundred strawberries there. As I carefully plucked them one by one, I asked Alice who was at my feet:

“Hey, but, weren’t you talking about a payday? Why are we gathering strawberries?”

This pajama-clad, self-proclaimed detective little girl is my employer. Today, I came to the NEET detective office after school and she said she was going to pay me for my work as a detective assistant, bringing me along to the rooftop.

“What do you mean by why? Those strawberries are your payment.”

I almost fell flat on my back from the roof. My upper torso dangled in the air, but I held onto the concrete edge and avoided falling down.

“Be careful! If the bowl falls, the strawberries will be ruined.”

I glanced at the sulking upside-down Alice. Worry a little about me too, will you!?

As I finished picking up my ruby-colored salary and climbed down the roof, Alice stared at the bowl.

“Just thinking that these are your salary makes people feel like eating them. How I should eat them this year? Anyways, just pluck off the stems first!”

“Hey, hold on! You’re gonna eat them?”

“Well, you looked somewhat dissatisfied with the strawberries, didn’t you?”

“No, that's not the point……”

I nearly got serious there, the problem is I don't want the strawberries as my salary!

“You have an income, right? So, why strawberries?”

“Good grief. You have before your very eyes these beautiful fruits of the earth not even comparable to ten thousand stars, yet what you actually desire is some cold-hearted money? There are many things in this world that can’t be bought with money.”

“Strawberries can be bought with money!”

Alice took a brown envelope from behind her teddy bear and shoved it into my face, then pulled the bowl out of my hands.

“Congratulations. With this, you are employed. Now you won't become a NEET even if you drop out of school. That's all for now.”

What the hell. Why don't you just be honest and hand it to me? I sat on the doorstep, counting the contents of the envelope. The amount was far more than I had expected. Is it really okay for me to take this? It made the hourly 700 yen rate of the ramen shop’s part-time job look meaningless.

“You don’t have to worry. I earn more than that.” Alice said as she squatted beside me.

“Even though you’re a NEET…”

“Like I always tell you, being a NEET and running an independent business does not contradict each other, because that's how it's defined.”

“Why did they make such a complicated definition anyway?”

Since Alice was staring at me from a close distance, it made me feel rather embarrassed. I averted my eyes and fixed them on the concrete floor.

“…This word originated from England. You know that much, right?”I nodded as Alice began her explanation.

“It all started in 1999, with a report presented by a part of the UK cabinet office called the Social Exclusion Unit named ‘New opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training’. That report’s objective was to assess how many 16-18 year olds were not in education, work or training, analyze the reasons, and produce proposals to reduce the numbers. You see? It was necessary to count them first, so the overwhelming minority of people under 18 who were unemployed but actually had an income weren’t differentiated nor excluded from the counting process. Even Sid Vicious would have been considered a NEET if he had been born a quarter of century later. “

Alice and I both looked up to the cloudy sky that connected us with England, thinking for a brief moment about that Punk Rocker who had died long before we were born.

“When the term reached Japan, the definition was altered, but the fundamental idea has not changed. According to the book of Daniel, we are numbered, numbered, weighed, divided. I suppose that’s the reason why we are classified like that. Even so, we're not being categorized due to a certain reason, so the term NEET is actually just like a random label that’s stuck on a shelf. It’s more like a meaningless acronym. For this reason—“

Alice stood up, with the bowl on her right hand and the teddy bear on her left hand. Her long black hair flowed over her shoulders and back like a river in winter, and a soft smile adorned her smooth, pale face.

“For this reason, I’ve chosen this word: As a tetragramaton to define myself. As a way to not have to use my arms and legs in the name of the country. As a way to spread soil and plant seeds all over this emptiness.”

And with that, Alice gave me that stern look again. I realized she was waiting for me to say something. I sighed and shook my head.

“Sorry. I don’t get what you’re saying.”

She just smiled broadly again. Her long hair waved as she began to walk down the stairs.

“It’s fine if you don’t understand, it’s one of the reasons why you’re still by my side after all. You probably can’t even guess how much you have supported me with your stupidity and insensitivity.”

Uhh. Are you making a fool out of me or are you praising me?

“Both, of course.”

“I know that!”

We took the strawberries to the ramen store on the first floor and Min-san decided to make jam out of them.

“This breed is rather sour, so they’re perfect for jam”.

She said, putting a pot on the stove. After sprinkling sugar on the strawberries to draw the juice out of them, she began heating them up, without stirring too much so as to leave some lumps.

Min-san was the young shopkeeper of Hanamaru Ramen, the place where I worked part-time. She usually wore a sarashi and a tanktop that made her look more like one of those Yakuza women who were at gambling rooms than a chef, but she was actually an expert in confectionery.

A bittersweet scent filled the ramen shop’s kitchen. It was already way past the opening time and the soup broth was also being cooked, but still, is this okay? Wouldn’t the customers run away?

“Master, I want to eat it fresh.”

Alice was sitting on the kitchen’s backdoor step, pattering the door with her feet. She was actually a hikikomori, so it was quite unusual to see her come to the store. Just how much is she looking forward to those strawberries?

“Is jam something you have to eat freshly made?”

“I’m sure you can’t find words in your vocabulary to describe that flavor.”

She was actually right. She actually tasted the jam with warm yoghurt. The strawberry juice spreading through the whiteness made it look great.

“It’s actually so delicious while it’s warm… I didn’t know that.”

“Do you understand the reason why I left my fort to wait here now?”

Alice was unimaginably picky with her food, but when it came to sweet stuff such as Min-san’s ice creams, she would gladly eat them without any complaint.

“So, will this be Narumi’s salary? Ahh, this month has been hard, so it’s a relief.”

I heard Min-san say that while I was carrying more yoghurt to my mouth, so I almost dropped the spoon from my hand. You too?!

"Please pay me a proper salary! I work for you very seriously!"

“Fine, fine. Next I’m going to put this in a jar”

Just leave the jam already!

But Min-san really started filling what looked like an empty kimchi jar, and then a smaller one, probably a menma jar.

“It will be better to eat this as soon as possible.”

“Why are there two jars?”

“The smaller one is for Ayaka, isn’t it obvious?”

Alice who was now sitting by my side answered. I received the jar and placed it on my lap. I looked at both Alice and Min-san’s faces for an instant and then lowered my gaze to look at my own feet.

“Give it to her; it’ll give you an excuse to bring her here.”

Min-san said in a tone as if nothing happened. She might not even noticed me nodding faintly.

Ayaka.

The girl who was once a part-time worker at this shop, and also my friend. She jumped off the school’s rooftop and had been slumbering for a long time, but she returned.

If that was a miracle,then…

Just how much of a cynic God is?

Alice pulled my sleeve as if she was reading my thoughts.

“…Yeah?”

“Like I already told you, that’s not a miracle.”

I absent-mindedly looked at her face, tilting my head.

“She woke up. That’s simply the reality. This is the reason that everyone can't notice miracles,so your only choice is to accept it.”

I turned my face away from Alice and fixed my gaze on the jar on my lap. The light of the fluorescent lamp gave the jam a pigeon blood-red glow.

Reality…

The shop’s door opened, a regular costumer had arrived. He ordered a shio ramen while frowning at the sweet scent that filled the air, so I left the jar and got up.

*

Ayaka was absent for the whole first year’s third academic term and didn’t wake up until four months after that, so she also lost around three months of her second year.

After being absent for such a long time, normally she wouldn’t be able to be promoted, obviously, but she still ended up attending class 2-4 with us because of special circumstances. I don’t really know what kind of agreement the school had with Ayaka’s parents and doctor. To be honest, I think it's better if they directly let her repeat the year.

The day after I got my payment, I put the jam jar inside my bag and went to school. I was running quite late but still somehow made it before the first bell. A group of girls were gathered three seats away from my seat. Among the crowd, I noticed a pair of metallic crutches. It was depressing just to look at them.

“Ayaka, your hair is growing really fast!”

“It’s almost the same length as before by now, isn’t it?” “Did you really have your head shaved?”

“Yup, it was completely cropped, I have a photo. See?”

“Uwah, is that really you?” “Didn't you see it already when you went to visit before this?”

“They say your hair grows faster when you’re unhealthy.” “They also say the faster your hair grows, the more perverted you are, right?” “Shouldn’t it be the opposite?” “Ah, Fujishima is here, Ayaka.”

Ah, they saw me. I pretended not to hear them, placing my bag on my desk while wishing for the bell just ring already.

At that moment, the crowd broke up, revealing Ayaka sitting in the middle. She doesn't look any different from before, as if the Angel Fix incident was just a lie.

It might have been a lie as well, at least for Ayaka, it was as if it really never happened. After all, she—

“Uhm. Good morning to you.” Ayaka said with an unnatural smile. The girls around us started to joke about her formal tone, and everyone in the classroom looked puzzled by the situation, waiting for my response. Never mind the others, even I, myself, don't know how to respond.

I sighed,taking the jar out of my bag and handing it to her. Ayaka stared at the ruby red jam with her eyes widened.

“Uh… This is from Min-san. She asked me to give it to you.”

“I’m sorry, Min-san is…?”

I gulped as if I had just tasted rotten jam. It had been a week since Ayaka had returned to school but I hadn’t talked to her about Hanamaru at all. It was painful having to explain her question, so I could only give her a short answer.

“She’s the owner of a ramen shop.”

“The place where you work, Fujishima-san?”

You worked there too, Ayaka...... I wanted to tell her that, but I couldn't say it, so I just turned around and returned to my seat. The bell finally rang, saving me from my dilemma.

*

“She speaks so formally to you and even calls you Fujishima-san, must be tough…”

My classmates who had pulled me to the bathroom during the break said that to me. I gave a faint nod. Her face was the same but not her memories and the way she talked to me, and that rendered me unable to respond to her.

“Ahh, she addresses me with san too so it’s not that bad ain’t it?”
“That's because girls never spoke casually to you!”

“But why is it that Shinozaki actually remembers things like where the music room was and all that stuff?” “They say that lifestyles can't be easily forgotten.” “She also remembered me as a kind and nice person.” “She was just flattering you.”

I read something like that somewhere too when I did a little research.

Generalized amnesia. People who suffer this kind of memory loss forget about some things about their past entirely, but some other things are just partially forgotten or not forgotten at all. The special circumstances regarding her promotion to our class were probably related to her rehabilitation. It isn't going to be easy for her to regain her lost memories about the people she used to interact with. The only problem is, I still had to see her face every day and have unnatural-sounding conversations.

I kept telling myself I had to endure it, because it is for Ayaka's sake and it would help her remember, but I couldn't help but find it depressing to go back to the classroom.

"But y'know, there's this relaxed atmosphere in the classroom when Ayaka is there, that hasn't changed." "She can't keep up with the class, though." "She was already like that before this."

"I did worse than Shinozaki in yesterday's quiz actually, what should I do?" "Go take private lessons" "Go back to first year" "Actually, go back to elementary school"

I absent-mindedly listened to my classmates' conversation and began to think I was the only one who was bothered. Probably because only for me this meant losing so many things. The times I spent with Ayaka. The things we laughed about and the things we cried about together.

I want her to remember, do I have any other choice but to keep talking to her in the classroom, keep spreading soil and watering the flowerbeds just like before, and wait for her memories to come back?

*

"So, why don't you take her to that ramen shop?"

Some classmates suddenly started talking to me after class, taking me by surprise.

“Yeah, you wanted to say thanks for the jam, right?”

Ayaka was also confused nodded because of the atmosphere. Why is everyone in this class so eager to meddle in other people’s business…?

“Go, Fujishima.” “Maybe I should go too, I feel like getting some ice cream from that sexy owner.” “I also want to go worship the owner’s sarashi-covered breasts.”

Perfect, someone come along please, because this is really awkward. That was what I was expecting, but in the end everyone seemed to have misunderstood, and went to different directions, leaving Ayaka and me by ourselves.

Our activities of the gardening club went smoothly. Fortunately, Ayaka remembered where the watering cans, fertilizers and tools were and how to use them.

Lately our teacher/advisor Sayuri-sensei tagged along and helped with the gardening club activities, enthusiastically saying things like: “Unlike Fujishima-kun, you're really reliable!”

I wanted to reply something like ‘I don’t want to hear that from someone who comes to meddle with soil while wearing a blouse and a tight skirt’, but I really was in no place to refute her claims. I wasn’t capable of looking after the flowerbeds properly by myself, so she was a great help.

Isn’t this basically the same as before? I caught myself thinking that while I was washing the shovels.

Of course, a few things weren’t the same. For example, Ayaka and I weren’t wearing the armband with the MGC—M High School Gardening Club— logo. I designed that logo and given that armband to her. Two days before she jumped off the roof, she left the armband in my care and I planned to give it back to her once she left the hospital, but there was no point in handing it to her now that she doesn’t remember anything about it, so I kept it inside my blazer pocket.

“Uh… Won’t I be a bother if I suddenly barge into that ramen shop where you work, Fujishima-san?”

Ayaka asked anxiously. I shook my head and denied it.

“You won’t be a bother.”

“But…”

This is not the same as before at all. Keeping things the same way isn't good at all! It just doesn’t feel right for her to be worried about being a bother when going to hang out at Hanamaru, this is just plain wrong!

“I’ll be bringing Ayaka along now.”

When I reached the school gates, I gave Min-san a call to let her know. When we got there, the place was really crowded, even though it was only around 5 PM. But that might be because it's a small shop that only had five counters.

“You really don’t remember anything at all? I lent you 50000 yen before this too…”

“Lying bastard!” Min-san smacked Tetsu-senpai from behind the counter. Regardless of the season, he wore a T-shirt that showed off his perfectly toned arms. This guy used to be a student at my school and also practiced boxing, but now he was a good-for-nothing professional gambler.

“Sorry, sorry, I think it was just 20000 yen.”

“I-I… Did I really borrow that much from you?”

Ayaka actually took him seriously.

“Ah, you really believe me? I think it was a bit more than that…”

“U-uhm, like, 30000 yen?”

“More!”

What do you mean by more! For an instant I seriously considered snatching away the miso ramen an office guy was carrying and pour it on Tetsu-senpai's head.

"Oh, my. I gave you a fully detailed explanation about how to defend yourself against hand grenades, do you not remember?"

Sitting next to Tetsu-senpai was Major, who had taken his military cap off and was frantically scratching his head. Major had the appearance of an elementary school kid, he is a college student—well, more or less, since he was actually a good-for-nothing military otaku.

"That… I don't remember at all…" Ayaka's eyes were filled with tears. "How do you defend yourself against them?"

Hey, don't ask! Sure enough, Major looked really happy and took a real (is it real?) hand grenade from inside his backpack and began explaining.

"The explosive power of a hand grenade in itself is no big deal. What actually wounds and kills is the shrapnel, so you have to cover the grenade with something bulky, like a human body for example. Vice-Admiral Fujishima, come here for a second."

"I don't want to, what are you thinking!? Hey, don't remove the pin please!"

"It's okay, it's one-third slower in comparison than an original one, so don't worry."

"What the hell are you talking about!?"

"The detonation time." "That's not what I meant!" "Get out of here!"

Min-san yelled, kicking Major and almost even me out of the shop.

"We promised to stay together at a Disneyland hotel this Christmas, do you remember about that? We even made reservations and everything."

Hiro-san nonchalantly held Ayaka's hand as he talked to her, mumbling beside her ears. He was wearing a black shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest and a platinum chain around his neck. He looked like he belonged to one of those fancy host clubs, but he was a good-for-nothing gigolo who leeched money off women.

"U-uh, uhm… I'm sorry."

Ayaka's face turned red when her hand was held, she arched her eyebrows and glanced at me with a troubled expression.

"Have you even forgotten that we're going out together?"

"W-were we really?"

"Look, I even have photographs." Hiro-san took out his cellphone. "This one is from the time when we went to Hokkaido."

"This girl isn't me, is she?"

"Ah, sorry, wrong photo. Here, here. At an Ikebukuro hotel."

"This looks like another different woman."

"Oh? How strange… This one, maybe?"

"Why are you bathing with two women?"

Hiro-san snapped his cellphone shut and airily drank a sip of beer, then let out a sigh, pretending to look all melancholic. You're going to get stabbed by a woman one of these days, you damn sex offender!

I went to the kitchen and looked at everyone while I was washing the dishes. That group of NEETs who were hanging around at the back of the ramen shop… Now that I think about it, Ayaka had known Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major for a longer time than me. The one who brought me here for the first time and let me know all these people—it was Ayaka.

And now, this same girl was standing in a corner of the shop, wearing an awkward little smile and slowly sipping cola.

I lowered my gaze and stared at a bowl inside the bubble-covered sink.

“Hey, Narumi.”

“Eh, ah, yes?” I heard Min-san calling me and lifted my head in surprise.

“Hand over the apron to Ayaka. Shift change.”

Shift change? It took me a while to comprehend what Min-san meant, so I was staring at her with a stupefied look and my hands under the running water from the tap.

“Come on, just do as I say. Ayaka, go to the kitchen. The only customers you’ll have to serve now are these guys so don’t worry.”

“E-eh eh?”

Ayaka looked as bewildered as me, but I somehow had the feeling that I understood what Min-san was trying to do, so I untied the apron from my waist to hand it over to Ayaka and went back to sit in front of the counter. She entered the kitchen and glanced at the stove, the sink and the piled-up plates with an uncomfortable look on her face.

“Narumi, order something.” Min-san said with her eyes fixed on the boiling soup and pointed at Ayaka.

I thought for a moment and told the flustered girl:

“…Tsukemen, a big portion.”

Ayaka blinked with surprise, and then turned her face towards Min-san.

“Uhm… One big tsukemen.”

“Got it. Big tsukemen.”

Min-san dropped the noodles into hot water and only said “Plates!” Ayaka was startled at first but soon after started moving on her own. She took square flat plates from the rack and served roast pork fillet and menma on them. Then she skillfully spread shredded dried seaweed over the noodles Min-san had boiled. I looked at Min-san and noticed the dumbfounded look she had on her face.

Before they knew it, Tetsu-senpai and the others had also stopped their noisy blabber, and only the sound of the boiling soup and the exhaust fan's noise echoed through the shop. Min-san finally made eye contact with Ayaka and smiled gently at her.

"Serve it, it's gonna get cold."

Ayaka placed the plate with the noodles and the bowl with the soup in front of me, and she said with a somewhat tearful business smile:

"…Sorry for the wait-"

I immediately averted my eyes. I picked up the chopsticks, feeling a warm pressure on my chest even though I had yet to take a bite.

Ayaka returned—she returned to Hanamaru.

Maybe everything wasn't the same as before, but still…

Min-san served ice cream for all of us. We were eating without talking too much but enjoying a peaceful atmosphere when the kitchen's back door creaked. The closest one to the door was Ayaka, who was sitting on a stool eating vanilla ice cream with cranberry sauce, but Min-san noticed first.

"Ayaka, someone's behind the back door, open it up."

"Eh?"

Ayaka left the ice cream cup and timidly pulled the door open. Standing over there, taking a step back when the door was suddenly opened and frowning at the hot steaming smell of ramen was, of course, the NEET detective in bear pajamas and white socks.

Alice looked up at Ayaka with cautious eyes while hiding half of her body behind the door. Ayaka had her back to us, but it's not really hard to imagine her eyes glittering with curiosity.

“W-waa…”

Upon hearing Ayaka’s voice, Alice was startled and trembled like a stray cat.

“Waa! Waa!”

Without giving Alice a chance to step back, Ayaka tightly hugged her little body, burying her face on her silky black hair. Alice cried out, trying to shake Ayaka’s arms off.

“See, Master!? It’s exactly the same utterly amazed reaction as the first time we met, I'm speechless! If she were to be reborn 7000 times without her memories she would still do the same things. Ayaka, stop squeezing me! I’m not a hugging pillow!”

“W-who is this child, is it Min-san’s child!?”

She dragged Alice inside the kitchen turning her head with her eyes sparkling as she inquired. Oh, so their first meeting had been like that, too. Now that I think about it, Alice had mentioned something like that before.

“As if that annoying brat could be mine!”

Min-san said preparing an ice cream serving and a chair for Alice, but Ayaka sat Alice on her own knees and lifted the spoon with ice cream to her mouth while saying “Ok, say ‘aah~’”

“Don’t treat me like a child! I’ll let you stir it and I’ll eat it myself!”

Then stir it yourself too.

Min-san put the spare chair away and Alice let out a sulky “hmph…”, having to stay on Ayaka’s lap.

In that moment, someone slid the shop’s door open and entered. Wearing a black sleeveless shirt under a deep red jacket and a menacing wolf-like expression was the yakuza boss, Yondaime.

“…What’s with this noisy gathering”, he muttered in a subdued tone as he looked around. I stared at him in mute amazement. Even Yondaime is here?

“What’s that, Gardening Club kid, got fired already?”

Upon noticing Ayaka was the one in the kitchen and I wasn’t wearing the apron, Yondaime shrugged his shoulders.

“Eh--ah, no, it’s not that…” While I stammered my response, Yondaime gave something to Ayaka with a:

“Here, take this.”

“U-uh?”

Ayaka opened the present in front of Alice. It was a triangular cloth with an odd design embroidered with beautiful colored threads. It was without a doubt handmade. He was really talented and expert in those kinds of handicrafts despite his appearance, after all.

“To congratulate that you left the hospital. It’s a charm from Africa or something like that; it’s supposed to make your wounds heal sooner. But hey, are these crutches just for show or what? You aren’t using them?”

Yondaime moved aside the pair of crutches that were leaning against the seat where Ayaka had been until a while ago and sat down.

“Uh, y-yes… Uhm, my legs have been getting better lately, but I bring them with me just in case.”

“So considerate, aren’t you, Yondaime? Why don't you make me a charm that makes it easier to hit the jackpots as well?”

Tetsu-senpai said, earning a glare from Yondaime.

“Shut the hell up, why would I make something for you?”

“Why would you make something for Ayaka?”

“’Cause she’s a friend of my brother. Master, I want ice cream too.”

With a dumbfounded expression, Ayaka was exchanging looks between the embroidery in her hands and Yondaime’s face. Between Ayaka’s arms, Alice said:

“He is the fourth generation of the Hinamura family, Souichirou. You called each other Hina-chan and Aya-chan respectively, so you should call him that from now on, too.”

“Hina-cha…?” Ayaka blinked.

“Alice, cut the bullshit.”

Hiro-san held his stomach, laughing at Yondaime’s serious and threatening tone, and in the blink of an eye everyone was laughing too. Even Min-san started calling him Hina-chan, and I also laughed. Of course, that caused Yondaime to hit me, but I was happy. That's because Ayaka was finally laughing, too.

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After Min-san closed the shop, Ayaka and I left together. It was quite late already, so the shopping district avenue we were walking on was completely dark.

“Thank you, Fujishima-san.”

Around two meters ahead of me, she turned around, and I felt a suffocating déjà vu from the first time Ayaka had brought me to Ramen Hanamaru. It was just like that day, only this time our positions were reversed. Hearing her say “It was fun, they were really interesting people” as if it was the first time she had been there gave me a downhearted feeling.

“Take me along again some other time.”

“…Ayaka, you used to work there part-time.”

When I said that, her smile stiffened.

“You were friends with those people before me. Alice can’t bathe by herself so you helped her, washed her hair and all that.”

“I-is that so…?”

Still facing in my direction, she began walking backwards. Even though she was doing something a little dangerous, the look on her face was calm.

“That's great, so we got along before this.”

A little embarrassed, Ayaka said that she had suddenly embraced Alice because she thought she was cute, but even though Alice complained, didn’t she look a bit happy?

So, it’s okay for you to go to that ramen shop again, even if I don’t take you along. Even if I get fired, it’s okay. That’s what I was thinking, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“Then, isn’t it great?” Ayaka suddenly spoke.

“…Uh?”

“I was a bit like my old self, isn’t that good?”

Even though it was a May night, I felt a cold chill as I finally realized. Yes, Ayaka was that kind of person. So much stronger than I was—pretending I wasn’t a lonely person, blending into the class and acting friendly with everyone.

And now, Ayaka was the one pretending. The reason I sometimes felt sad when I looked at her was probably because I could somehow understand how she was feeling.

Nevertheless, we started walking in silence once again.

I want to believe that time would eventually ease the pain. Everything would be just like it was before, and Ayaka would remember everyone--that was the miracle I wished for.

After we parted ways at the station after passing through the bridge, I suddenly recalled the Ayaka the day before she jumped off the rooftop, so I ignored her waving at me and turned around to run away.

*

The next day after school, Ayaka told me that she wanted to clean up the greenhouse.

“Isn’t it perfect for the gardening club? It’s such a waste not to use such a wonderful greenhouse!”

Sitting in the classroom putting the textbooks into my bag, I averted my eyes without knowing what to say to her.

Obviously, she doesn’t remember.

There was a big glass greenhouse in the school’s courtyard, something uncommon for a public school. Ayaka no longer remembered the blue mutated flowers she grew in that place. Those flowers were a variety of opium that had served as the raw material for the drug that had made a mess of the city last winter, Angel Fix.

Alice had said that the guilt Ayaka felt upon realizing she had been cultivating narcotics was the reason she jumped off the rooftop. Whether that was true or not, it was impossible to know now. A cruel miracle had painted out the truth.

The group of drug manufacturers had been annihilated and most of its members were now either dead or disabled so the raw material supply routes hadn’t been elucidated, and almost no one knew that blue flowers with the power of invoking angels were grown in the school’s courtyard.

Because of that, Ayaka could smile without a trace of worry while saying she wanted to use that greenhouse again.

I don’t know if that is a good or a bad thing. I want her to remember me, but…

“…Alright. I’ll borrow the key.”

Last year end, there was no one left to take care of the greenhouse so it had became some sort of warehouse. Some chairs, desks and a blackboard had been brought there.

“Oh, why would they do something like this?”

Ayaka got in a huff as she scanned the untidy interior of the greenhouse. Her angry gestures hadn’t changed.

“But it makes me somewhat nostalgic to see desks and a blackboard here.”

Sayuri-sensei who had came with us said.

“Nostalgic? But they brought them here recently…”

“No, I was thinking about the time when the gardening committee still existed and I was still new. There weren’t many people serious about taking care of plants, and maintaining flowerbeds is still okay, but a greenhouse is hard work.”

Sayuri-sensei looked up at the transparent ceiling.

“This place became a gathering place for delinquents, so I thought I should do something about it. I talked with the kids that hung out here and they can't seem to keep up with the lessons, so I gave them supplementary classes here. I had been a tutor when I was a college student, so I can teach almost all subj—”

“It’s wrong to use a greenhouse for that!”

Ayaka slapped a desk and looked around thoroughly.

“It’s such a nice greenhouse. It has sprinklers, a thermostat and even automatic skylight openings!”

“I-I’m sorry… But look, it has air conditioning, so it’s really comfortable.”

Sayuri-sensei said as if nothing happened. But really, how did she manage to pull such a thing off? Maybe she was popular among the delinquents since she’s pretty.

“I had fun, but many things happened…”

Her face became clouded. I wonder what had happened.

I suddenly remembered something: Ayaka told me that the gardening committee was abolished, but I didn’t know the reason. Sayuri-sensei was probably around 26 or 27 years old, so the committee still existed until 4 or 5 years ago.

“But, why the greenhouse of all places?” Ayaka said, puffing out her cheeks.

“I had to do it in secret and the greenhouse wasn’t in use. Also, don’t you think it’s nice to have a classroom full of flowers?”

Ayaka muttered a “That could be nice, but…”

“So, do you want to try it too, Shinozaki-san?”

“Eh?”

“Your grades aren’t good enough, so you need supplementary lessons.”

Sayuri-sensei said with her eyes sparkling.

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But, why do I have to join this ‘classroom full of flowers’ too?

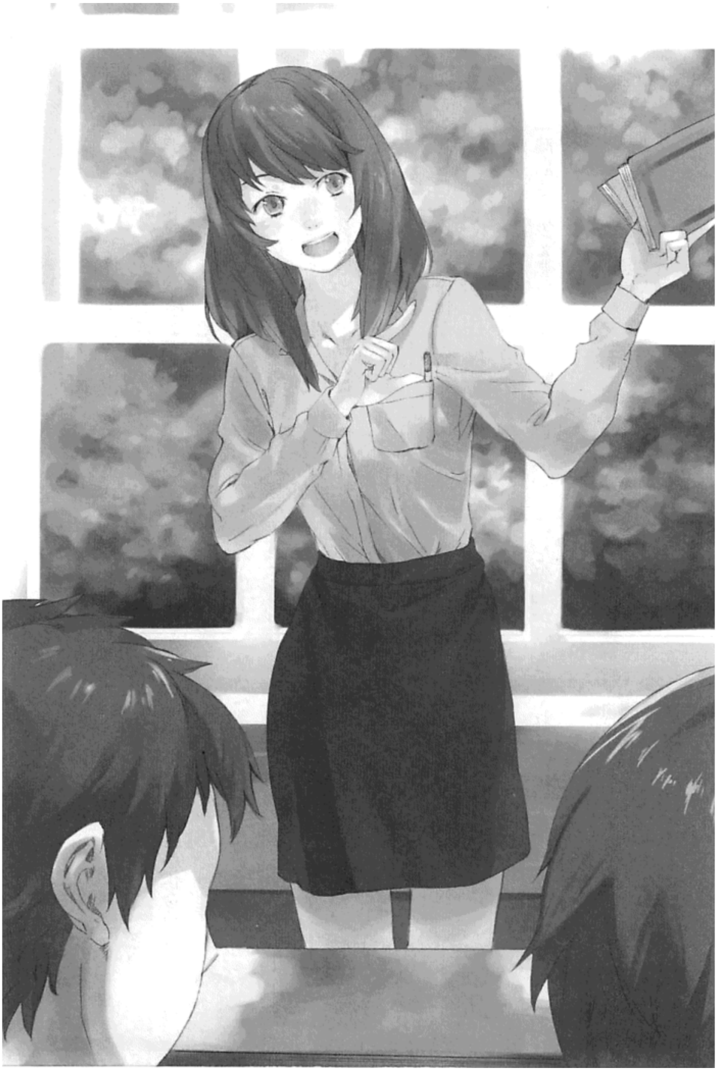
“You skipped class a lot during the third term so your grades were bad, weren’t they, Fujishima-kun?”

“Ugh-“ She has a point, so I couldn’t say anything.

From all the carelessly piled up desks and chairs, we only left three of each inside the greenhouse. We also moved the blackboard to a warehouse next to the staff room. The greenhouse supplementary class from the past had used a blackboard, but this time there are only two pupils so it isn’t needed.

The day when we started class, we lined up planters with flowers close to the wall so they wouldn’t be seen from the outside. We only stayed for around two hours after school, but Sayuri-sensei taught us one-on-one behind the desk. Even though she was a Japanese teacher, it feels like she was also better at teaching English and Mathematics.

“Back then I had to teach a larger group of people, so teaching two people is easier~” she said somewhat nostalgically. It seemed half of the reason that she taught us was because of personal interest.



With Ayaka’s desk right next to mine because we had to share the same textbook, I got a weird feeling. What was I to Ayaka right now? A person who was comfortable to be with, maybe?

But if that was the case, it would be what she felt before losing her memories.

What is Ayaka to me?

What am I to Ayaka?

I still didn't have a clear answer in the end. Even so--

"Fujishima-kun, you did bad on the recent quiz, didn't you? Ahh, you should motivate yourself already!"

"Fujishima-san, you have a bad memory, don't you? Sensei explained this the other day... Ah, I'm telling you that's not how you do it..."

Hey, since when has this become a place for these two to teach me?

Well, whatever. They look like they're having fun anyway.

From that time, Ayaka didn't show up to Hanamaru Ramen. It was a bit lonely, but that couldn't be helped. Min-san didn't tell me to bring her either.

I think it's better to wait until she decides to go by herself. I kept going to the greenhouse every day, trying hard to pretend that Ayaka's appearance and gestures as a whole were of someone I didn't know. I assiduously prepared for the coming exams. Looking back now, that was probably the time I was the most diligent in my whole life. That was because she was by my side, but there weren't many things we could talk about, so we enjoyed the air conditioning like flowers swaying in the wind.

"It's a little weird how I'm teaching you various things, isn't it, Fujishima-san?" she said with a smile, telling me about the different methods of watering and pruning for each kind of plant, temperature control, and even flower language.

"This big flowerbed has gone to ruin, I wonder what I should plant here… There are so many choices."

Sorry, it's ruined because I didn't take care of it at all. But I was glad that Ayaka hadn't forgotten about gardening, because the only time in school when Ayaka's smile wasn't forced was when she was at the flowerbeds and the greenhouse.

We did our club activities and studied, catching up to the rest of the class. By doing that, wasn’t it like little by little we were getting back our old selves? That’s what I thought.

But of course, there's no way those days that were like tea parties under fleecy clouds would last forever.

*

A Wednesday in the middle of May, immediately after class ended, the school’s announcement chime sounded, and a female student’s voice came from the speaker.

'Fujishima-kun from second year, class 4, please come to the student council room urgently. I repeat: Fujishima-kun from second year, class 4, please come to the student council room urgently.'

The classroom became noisy, with my annoying classmates trying to guess what I have done.

“Wasn’t that the student council president just now?” “Fujishima, what did you do?” “Did they find out about you drawing porn in the computer room or something?”

“I stopped drawing long ago!” Wait, the problem is why do you all know about this!?

“Whatever, just go, that girl is scary when she’s angry.”

“Yeah, and she also gets angry if you don’t address her respectfully like ‘Kaoruko-sama!’”

“And her weak point is the mole below her lips, so if things get dangerous attack her there.”

After my classmates finished telling me a bunch of lies about that student council president whose face I didn’t remember, they pushed me out to the corridor. What on earth is going on? What business does the student council have with me?

The student council room (student council's general executive management room, to be more precise) was on the third floor of the north school building. The room was divided in half by a bookshelf, and apparently the other half served as the Inspection Committee room.

"Ah, the president is at the inspection half now."

A male member of the student council who was using the copying machine let me know that as soon as I entered the room. I glanced the interior, there were piled up pamphlets, copying equipment and a big, sloppy desk that made it look like a field hospital. I somehow had a bad premonition.

However, in sharp contrast to the disastrous other half, the inspection committee room was neatly organized. I knocked and the door was slid open by a bespectacled female student with a rabbit-like appearance. Judging by her lapel badge, she was a third year, but I knew at first glance that she wasn't the president. There was another third year female student with long hair and a sharp expression sitting on a chair by a long desk. Her piercing look wasn't like Yondaime's— it was more like a cornered look.

The long-haired girl opened her mouth: "Fujishima-kun from 2-4?"

"…Ah, y-yes, that's me. I'm here because I was called."

The girl with glasses by her side spoke: "Sorry to make you come all the way here. Kaoruko-chan said that no matter what—"

"Be quiet, Kousaka." The student council president interrupted. The third year named Kousaka sullenly fell silent.

Kaoruko… I remember. Yes, if I'm not mistaken, her name is Hayano Kaoruko. She assumed as student council president shortly after I transferred in November last year.

"You're in the gardening club and the computer room, right?"

She asked somewhat bitingly. I nodded, somewhat troubled. I wonder if I did something that made the student council president angry… Then, Kaoruko-senpai's next words confirmed my bad premonition.

“Both are scheduled to be closed on the next student council general meeting.”

“It hasn’t been decided yet.” Kousaka-senpai interjected.

“…Closed? But, why? They have the required two members.”

“Because rules are going to change on the next meeting. The minimum will be six members. By removing clubs like yours that don’t do enough activities but still eat up the funds, the budget can go to clubs that are actually active.”

“Kaoruko-chan, you don’t have to say it like that!”

“Be quiet, Kousaka. Didn't the Inspection suggest the idea in the first place? In any case--”

“W-wait a second, please. The gardening club is active!”

“The flowerbeds and the potted plants were neglected for most of the third term. The student council had to dispose of the withered plants, you know?”

“Ah…”

I had nothing to say in my defense. After the Angel Fix incident, Ayaka was hospitalized the whole time and I didn’t come to school at all. During the spring break, I got involved in Meo’s case and I completely forgot about the gardening club. Only recently I have been doing it seriously.

“In the staff room they were even talking about taking the flowerbeds and the greenhouse away. It’s pointless to waste electricity on a greenhouse that’s not in use.”

No, that’s the place that Ayaka, Sayuri-sensei and I use to study—I had to keep my mouth shut. Sayuri-sensei had told me to keep it a secret, so I couldn’t say it out loud.

“And because of that, the gardening club will be eliminated. The meeting won't be held until the end of the month, but I think it's better for you to clean up the things starting from now."

“No… No, it's not.” I suddenly stepped towards the president.

“Aren't there any other ways? It hasn't been decided yet, right? Ayaka's back, so from now on we--”

My voice gradually faded because of my nervousness and I gulped without knowing what else to say, but Kousaka-senpai continued:

“He's right, that's really cruel, Kaoruko-chan, we won't know if the changes will be accepted until the meeting!”

“Kousaka, be quiet!” She said for the third time, a whole three times!

“There's no way the changes won't be approved. Even almost everyone at Management agreed.”

“Management only wants big clubs to remain, of course they would agree! To just ignore the opinions of the people concerned is--”

“That can't be helped, the general meeting's purpose is to listen to people's opinions. We can't consider every single person from every single club.”

“Kaoruko-chan, have you seen the small culture club's activities? You haven't, right? I'm from inspection, so I have seen them. The Floral Arrangement Club, the Tea Ceremony Club and the Photography Club have only four or five members, but they all do their best!”

I could just stand there bewildered while they started fighting in front of my eyes, ignoring my presence as though I was air. I couldn't barge into their conversation either.

It was then that Kaoruko-senpai noticed me again, using her hands to cover Kousaka-senpai's mouth while coughing awkwardly.

“I-in any case, I called you here today so it wouldn't be so sudden if the club is abolished. The change in the rules is practically decided already, so I leave in your hands the tasks of clearing away the flowerbeds and the greenhouse.”

As soon as she finished saying that, Kaoruko-senpai walked away from the Inspection office. I lowered my head after seeing her slide the door close behind her back.

“Ahh... Sorry about all this.”

Kousaka-senpai sighed and sat down, offering me a chair too. Even though I only heard what Kaoruko-senpai had to tell me, I felt suddenly exhausted, so I sat down without even thinking twice.

The gardening club is going to be abolished? The only place Ayaka and I have left?

“It's true that it was the Inspection's idea, you know? This year I decided to investigate how every club used their budget, and found a lot of unknown charges after some investigation.”

So, Kousaka-senpai is from the Inspection Committee... In the end, a huge fuss was made out of it by the people in charge of the Execution, no wonder nobody dares to stop them.

"No...... That doesn't really matter actually."

Six members are required for the club to continue.

“To avoid having "ghost members", the student council is planning to keep a close eye on the clubs and ask them to report their activities.”

“What's the purpose of doing that with high school clubs?”

“I don't really know, but Kaoruko-chan is determined to do it.”

Then, what can I do? Last spring there wasn't a single person who joined gardening club. Well, obviously people aren't going to join if there aren't any activities? They might not even know of the existence of the club.

“And in the staff room, everyone was really interested in the proposition of changing the rules...”

So, I don't really have anything in my favor.

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“Closing down the club...... huh?”

That same day during the greenhouse classes, Ayaka was on the verge of tears as I told her about my conversation with the student council. Sayuri-sensei also knitted her eyebrows and sighed.

“I also heard about that during the staff meeting... It's such a pity......”

Ayaka clung to Sayuri-sensei, saying:

“Isn't there anything we can do? If the club disappears, who will take care of the flowerbeds and the greenhouse?”

“They won't assign money to maintain them, so they'll probably take the flowerbeds and the greenhouse away...” Sensei replied.

“That's... After all Fujishima-san and I have done...!”

Ayaka choked on her own words and a heavy silence took over the greenhouse.

I didn't really feel like studying anymore, so I made up a lie about having to leave early because of my part-time job. If I talked to one of the NEETs about this matter, maybe I can come up with some idea.

“Fujishima-kun, do you know that students are not allowed to have part-time jobs in this school?” Sayuri-sensei said with an awkward smile. Damn, so there's a rule like that?

“Auhh, uhm...”

“Well, it doesn't matter for me. But make sure the student counselor and the other teachers don't find out, okay? You're not working in an arcade or something like that, are you? Arcades and karaoke centers are a no-no.”

“No, it's a ramen shop...” That was good enough for her, apparently. “Then, I'll give you this so you'll remember to do your homework” she said while pinning a clothespin with some sort of a tag to my shirt's pocket.

“Don't take it off until you're home!”

“Why? What's this for?”

“So you'll see it when you arrive home and take off your uniform, then you'll think 'Oh, I had to do this!' I used to do it too when I was in high school.”

That's incredibly embarrassing. Going to Hanamaru with this... But I didn't have the heart to protest, seeing Sayuri-sensei smiling with such sweetness and enthusiasm.

As I was taking my bag and getting up to leave the greenhouse, I noticed Ayaka looking at me without saying anything. What's wrong?

“Uh... Do you want to come along, Ayaka?”

“Can I!?”

Ayaka got up enthusiastically. Huh? If you wanted to go there you didn't have to ask for my permission--

No, of course she couldn't just go by herself yet. I suddenly remembered those times when Ayaka and I had just met. It was because of Ayaka leading me there that I could blend into the radiance of Hanamaru Ramen. To a person that goes there alone, the shop is just too radiant, too warm.

“Oh my... Do you two hate studying that much?”

Sayuri-sensei joked, getting out of the greenhouse with us. When we were about to be separated, she whispered to my ear:

“Take her outside as many times as possible, okay?”

As many times as possible, huh… But Ayaka just wanted to see Min-san and Alice, it wasn't like she particularly wanted to go with me.

But if the Ayaka from before returned, if she regained her memories…

*

When we arrived to the shop, I took off my blazer to put on the apron. Min-san gazed at my shirt's pocket and tilted her head.

“What's that?”

I looked downwards and remembered the tag pinned to my pocket.

“E-eh… Because of my homework, so I wouldn't forget it and all that…”

I blushed and removed the note, stuffing it back to my pocket. How unexpected, I forgot all about it so easily.

“Are you an elementary school kid or what?”

It's true. That person's more like an elementary school teacher. I smiled weakly and started to chop onions.

Min-san had asked Ayaka to take Alice her meal, to which Ayaka responded by taking the tray and exiting the kitchen looking extremely happy, not returning though it's already half an hour. I saw Min-san say something to her before she got out, perhaps asking her to feed Alice or wash her clothes?

While I was chopping some cabbage, I looked at Min-san who had her eyes glued to her soup from the corner of my eye. It might be that she cared for Ayaka, so she gave Ayaka work to do so that she could recover her memories earlier.

“I wonder if she’ll return to work here soon… She’s 100 times more useful than you, Narumi.”

“That’s the reason!?”

I unintentionally said out loud. Okay, okay, I’m dumb anyway.

Even if the gardening club disappeared, Hanamaru would still be here. That’s what I thought at first, but I shook my head. To Ayaka, this was Min-san and Alice’s place. But even if she remembered about this, her memories of me might still be buried……

That's the reason why the Gardening Club must exist to us, right?

Whatever the case… Soon, the club will disappear.

While I was thinking about that and putting vegetable scraps inside a tupper, the first customer of the day slid the door open, poking only her head in-- a surprising guest. I was dumbstruck as Min-san greeted the person with a “Welcome” and a business smile.

“A-ah, I’m sorry, I’m not a customer.” Kousaka-senpai lightly waved her hand. The steam of the shop fogged her glasses, so she took them off to wipe them and put them on again.

“Ah, Fujishima-kun, here you are.” She said, showing a relieved smile.

“S-senpai…? Why?”

“Erm……” Kousaka-senpai hesitantly looked around.

“Come in. Don’t just stand there.”

Min-san said as if nothing had happened, and Kousaka-senpai walked into the shop with unsteady steps.

“Here, free of charge. You’re here to talk with Narumi? Don’t worry, have a seat.”

Ice cream with strawberries we picked before this was placed in front of Kousaka-senpai. Min-san always gave the first young customers some ice cream for free.

“Ah, th-thanks.”

She sat down on a chair in front of me, looking like a rabbit trying to hide in its burrow.

“Sorry to bother you at work, Fujishima-kun, uhm, you see…”

“You should taste it before it melts.”

Kousaka-senpai was acting weird, so I encouraged her to taste the ice cream first.

“Ah, o-okay… Uwaah… It’s delicious!”

As expected from Min-san’s ice cream, it was like magic. Kousaka-senpai looked more relaxed by the time she finished eating.

“So… What’s the matter? Is it about earlier?”

I wonder if it is something urgent related to the gardening club.

“Fujishima-kun, I… have a favor to ask you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Perhaps something can be done about the gardening club.”

I leaned my body towards the counter. “R-really!?”

“Uhm… I know a senpai who’s already graduated, he used to be in Inspection too, and he's in… What was it, again? That gang with black T-shirts.”

Black T-shirts gang…? Ah, Hirasaka-gumi. Led by Yondaime, the good-for-nothings of the city had formed a gang of young yakuza. Of course, some former students and dropouts from my school might be in the group too. Which meant—

“According to the rumors, Fujishima-kun the most trusted person in the gang.”

Uwah, I knew it. I quickly hid my face behind my palm.

Though I wasn't a member of Hirasaka-gumi, but by a twist of fate I had ended up sharing sake and becoming sworn brothers with their leader, Yondaime. Even before that, everyone in the group had started calling me Aniki, even though they were older than me.

"I heard you could find out about anything just by asking you?"

"No, no, that's a complete lie." Rumors are scary…

"Then, you're a client for the office?"

Min-san said by my side. Taken aback, I glanced at her and then at Kousaka-senpai, who had that scared look on her face again. I see, so that's it.

Before I could say anything, Min-san picked up the phone of the shop.

"…Alice? A client is coming. Narumi will take her there, so tell Ayaka to come downstairs. Ahh? Let Narumi do that. Ayaka is better? Duh, I know that!"

So my existence is more useless than Ayaka with both of my employers… Wait, Ayaka is going to replace me!?

I looked at Min-san's profile as she was hanging up the phone, and I understood. She had been looking for a chance to dismiss me and get Ayaka to work here. I get it. I understand.

"Senpai, let's go upstairs."

I said to Kousaka-senpai, untying my apron.

"Upstairs? Uhm…"

"You were looking for someone who would investigate anything they're asked, weren't you?"

After looking around restlessly, she nodded.

“Then I have a suitable candidate.”

Ayaka and I passed by each other on the stairs at the back of the shop. Her hair was wet and there's a fragrance of shampoo as well, so she probably just bathed with Alice.

“Uhm, Fujishima-san, her hair still hasn’t dried, so take the hairdryer and—”

She noticed Kousaka-senpai behind me, and they both exchanged confused looks. It was too much trouble to explain the situation.

“Ah, yeah, okay.”

Do I really have to do this? She hates the hairdryer, so she’ll get violent when I try to dry her hair. While thinking that, I chivvied Kousaka-senpai to the third floor.

Of course, just like everyone else who entered the NEET Detective Agency for the first time, Kousaka-senpai shivered upon feeling the coldness in the air-conditioned room and perplexedly looked at the computers and monitors filling the walls and then at the pajama-clad black-haired girl snugly seated on her bed.

Furthermore, I casually opened the fridge as if I was in my own house, took out a Dr Pepper can and handed it to Alice, then I sat on the bed and turned the hairdryer on to start drying her hair, so Kousaka-senpai just stood there, speechless.

“Oh, uhm, senpai, this is Alice. She’s a detective.”

“I’m not an ordinary detective, I’m a NEET detective. Inside this seventeen square meter fortress, the world dances on my palm. Narumi! Don’t blow hot wind on my face! Ayaka is much more careful!”

You’re asking for too much. It's because you're drinking Dr. Pepper that it's hard for me to move!

“Fujishima-kun, so y-you… have these kind of hobbies!?”

Kousaka-senpai finally spoke. What hobbies? What does she mean?

“Using the hairdryer on other people’s hair is one of your hobbies? Waa, I told you not to blow hot wind on my face!”

“It’s because you keep turning your face around!”

As I held her head from behind so she’d stay still, Alice let out a sulky “mmh” and Kousaka-senpai said something like:

“With such a small little girl…” while covering her face with her hands. Hey, what’s with the weird misunderstanding?

“You’re a client, so start telling me the contents of your request.”

Alice pointed at Kousaka-senpai who still wasn’t able to catch on to the sudden situation and could only stammer a “W-well, uhm…”

Alice’s next words, however, made senpai’s expression freeze.

“I know you are Kousaka Yukari from M High School’s third year, class 1, head of the student council’s inspection committee and friend of student council president Hayano Kaoruko since middle school.”

Moreover, just like she had done with me when I first met her, Alice fluently spoke of senpai’s height and weight, phone number and address, and even family background.

“You might be wondering why a detective would invade their client’s privacy. The main point is to show you the extent of my abilities, and I didn’t want you to waste time explaining your background— those were the two reasons.”

Befuddled, Kousaka-senpai slumped down into the cold wooden floor.

“Briefly explain just the content of your request.”

“…A gardening club is a weird club to begin with, isn’t it?”

Senpai started talking.

“There used to be a gardening committee before, do you know that?”

I nodded. Ayaka had told me about that.

“About the reason the committee was abolished, back then I still hadn’t enrolled at the school but… Something terrible happened.”

“The death of a male student named Hayano Tomohiko, right?”

Alice suddenly said, almost making me drop the hairdryer.

A death incident?

Kousaka-senpai also stared at Alice in astonishment. “…Y-you know about that?”

“Don’t take a NEET detective lightly. When you showed up on the security cameras, I confirmed your identity and subsequently made a brief search of information related to you from a few years ago.”

No matter how many times I see her do it, her information gathering skills will always surprise me. But more importantly, did she just say Hayano just now?

“So, you probably already know he was Kaoruko-chan’s older brother, too.”

“I know. Go on.”

Student council president’s older brother’s death… Was that the reason of the gardening committee’s abolishment?

Kousaka-senpai gulped before she resumed talking.

“Apparently, the gardening committee had become something like a gathering spot for delinquents. Kaoruko-chan’s brother was part of the committee too, but he had a weak heart so he skipped school often. When he occasionally showed up, he was with those delinquents a lot, apparently as some sort of gofer. On an extremely cold day, it seems he was asked to run an errand as a form of bullying— people found him collapsed in the backyard in the end.

He was taken to the hospital, but he died there.”

So that’s why the Gardening Committee was abolished?

“I heard that someone dropped out of school because of this, but nobody knows the details of the whole incident. Anyways, that was how the Committee was closed down, and the flowerbeds and greenhouse were originally planned to be cleared away as well……”

But……?

There are still flowers blooming in the school up till now, why is that?

”I’m not sure about the reason, but the Gardening Club was founded that time.”

I switched off the power switch of the hair dryer, blankly combing Alice’s hair while thinking repeatedly about what Kousaka-senpai said. The birth of the Gardening Club— what is the reason for that?

”I’m not sure as well. The fees for maintaining the flowerbeds and the greenhouse were then listed into the budget of the clubs in the Student Council, and the Gardening Club officially took over the Gardening Committee’s jobs— and that continued up till now. The reason that caused Kaoruko-chan to want to change the rules would probably be because of the budget, she thinks that letting the fees that were forcibly listed into the budget continue till now is very unreasonable; of course, this might have some influence from her brother’s incident as well.”

The Gardening Committee that caused her brother to die— and the Gardening Club. She probably hates us a lot.

But if she only cares about the budget, she would only need to cancel the name of the club in the budget, and doesn’t really need to abolish the whole club.

”But the members of the Gardening Committee and the Student Council had already graduated, so we can’t find any information no matter how hard we search in school.”

”Why are you investigating these things? What do you want to know?”

Hearing Alice’s inquiries, Kousaka-senpai stayed silent for awhile, and raised her head.

”I want to know of the reason. If we just count the budget of the clubs, I don’t have a reason to object to the amendment of the case as a member of the Inspection if there’s no proper reason. Additionally, the case would probably be passed since the larger clubs agree about this. On the other hand, if there’s a proper reason, I would think of a way to stop Kaoruko-chan, because……”

Kousaka-senpai fixed her gaze on her knees.

”Doing all this is just strange, Kaoruko-chan must have some problems. If we changed the rules, more than half of the cultural clubs would disappear. Even if the structure of the club is small, it might be important to someone.”

My hand fell on Alice’s thigh with a thwack.

Even if the structure is small, it might be someone’s—

”…… Narumi?”

Alice turned over, facing my chest, then stared at me with her large round eyes.

”…… Mnn, sorry. It’s nothing.”

Alice rammed my chest away with her forehead, then turned over to look at Kousaka-senpai again.

”That’s your request? You only wish to get information?”

”…… Eh?”

Kousaka-senpai raised her head, her eyes looking somewhat moist. Or maybe it’s just because my own eyes were moist……

”I am a NEET detective, the messenger of the dead. If only you would make a request, I would find out the truth even if I need to plunge into the Cocytus[1] in the deepest depths of the underworld, but the only thing that we would gain in the end would only be the words of the dead. That might be able to console the living, but that's the most that it can do. However……"

Alice's cold hands grasped my wrist on her thighs.

"Narumi is here. He's my assistant detective."

I choked, unable to say anything, and could only look at Alice's luscious long hair silently. What…… did she say about me just now?

"His ears aren't good, eyesight is bad, he's dumb and insensitive, and also helplessly slow. But he has something that I cannot achieve."

It seemed that senpai was already dazed by Alice's words, completely clueless about what she said; I'm the same about that. The things that Alice cannot do, but I can?

"The ability to crystallize truth in words from the core— that's different from a detective's ability to understand words from reality, or you can say that it's completely opposite to it. Those are not even words that have faded— but 'stories'. The crystallization of happiness and despair in reality."

"Alice, what are you talking ab—"

"Only you are able to change Hayano Kaoruko's decision of changing the rules 'in a practical level'. That was what I meant."

Alice did not turn back, continuing forcefully.

Only me……

"Kousaka Yukari, no matter how you request it, the results will not change. Narumi will fight to guard his kingdom. But I still have to ask you again, is information the only thing that you wish to gain?"

Only the sounds of the cooling fans in the machines and the sounds of the air conditioning functioning remained in the room for a long time. Finally, Senpai raised her head.

”Please help me. I want to stop Kaoruko-chan.”

1. ↑ The river of wailing/ lamentation in the underworld in Greek mythology.

Chapter 2

“Hayano? Hayano Tomohiko?”

As soon as she heard the name, the middle-aged female teacher, Hirabayashi-sensei’s face suddenly clouded over.

The day after we accepted Kousaka-senpai’s request, I went to the staff’s office after school with the excuse of wanting to borrow the keys to the greenhouse, and I asked her since she’s there. She was once the advisor of the Gardening Committee four years ago.

“Mnn, yes, of course I remember him.”

The teacher closed her class namelist and crossed her arms after placing the namelist on the table.

“He wasn’t so healthy, so he seldom came to the school. But I had no idea that time that he was treated like that in the committee. I was originally thankful that Sayuri-sensei could make them more obedient, really…… But why are you asking about this?”

“Eh? W- well…… Because I’m in the Gardening Club, and I heard about this from a senpai.”

I hurriedly made up a lie. Basically, there weren’t any senpais from the Gardening Club that I know of, but Hirabayashi-sensei didn’t get suspicious about that. It seems that I can’t ask on anymore. As I was about to leave the office after bowing to her, the voice of a male teacher came from the other side of the partition.

“Even so…… Though it isn’t really nice to say this, but it’s all thanks to that incident that those good-for-nothings drop out of school. So it’s not that bad.”

“Really, please don’t speak of these irresponsible things.”

“Didn’t Ichinomiya give you a lot of trouble? I won’t be surprised even if he’s arrested by the police.”

Ichinomiya?

This particular name kept lingering beside my ears as though I've heard of it for quite a lot of times. When I recalled about it, I've already ran towards Hirabayashi-sensei's desk.

"— Wh- what is it, Fujishima-kun?"

"I- Ichinomiya? Does that mean Ichinomiya Tetsuo-senpai?"

A middle-aged teacher with streaks of white hair among his otherwise black hair had a rather awkward expression on his face, it seems that he's the one who spoke to Hirabayashi-sensei just now. Perhaps he thought that letting other people hear what he said just now isn't that good, he tried to smooth things over.

"So you know him? Mnn, it seems that he's rather well known. He was like a mad dog, lashing out first before anything else whenever he does anything. His grades were terrible as well, and I've heard that he's a rogue up till now."

Ichinomiya Tetsuo— Tetsu-senpai dropped out from my school for four years now. Was that really the reason that he dropped out.

"That's right, Ichinomiya was one of the delinquents who treated Hayano as a gofer!" The middle-aged teacher answered agitatedly. I felt a cold chill gradually rising from my toes.

"It was said that he wasn't caught because there were no evidence. Since he chose to drop out himself, it shows that he's really in the wrong. That means Hayano was killed by these people."

"Tetsu… senpai…… Bu—"

I nearly blurted something out in agitation, but immediately swallowed it back again. Hirabayashi-sensei and the other teacher looked rather shocked. I immediately turned around and left, escaping the staff's office.

The person who killed Kaoruko-senpai's brother was actually Tetsu-senpai?

He dropped out because of that? How could this be possible? This must be a lie!

I didn’t say anything to Ayaka or Sayuri-sensei, but immediately rushed out of the school, riding to Hanamaru Ramen on my bike.

*

Of course, Alice knew of this long ago.

“Four students dropped out of their own accord after the incident, all of them were students who had contact with Hayano Tomohiko; this is the namelist. The only person who was confirmed to have contact with the victim that day was the fourth person.”

Under the air outlet in the office, Alice spoke of that in a chillingly businesslike tone and handed me a photocopied paper. The names and classes of four guys were listed on the paper, while the fourth name was Ichinomiya Tetsuo. I stared at the name.

“Tetsu-senpai is—”

Though the words slipped out of my mouth, I didn’t really know what I wanted to say.

“I already phoned him to come.” Alice said: “I only knew of this today. Basically, us NEETs would not investigate the past of the others. Major, Hiro, and Yondaime might not know of this as well, but of course there’s a possibility that they just didn’t mention it.”

This really doesn’t matter. The main thing is, Tetsu-senpai actually bullied a sick student by asking him to be his gofer, and even caused him to die?

That’s impossible! I wanted to say that. Senpai isn’t that kind of person!

“Narumi.”

Even though Alice called my name, I couldn't even stand up for a moment.

"Narumi! Why aren't you moving? You can't even make good soup even if you cringe like a clam, so why don't you hurry up and get me a can of Dr. Pepper!?"

I slowly stood up, taking out a can from the fridge. When I opened the can, Alice extended her hands and said:

"Drink it."

"…… Why? I don't want to."

"Stop fussing and drink it. This is an order from your superior!"

How can this count as an order from a superior? However, I couldn't help but take a sip as I was glared by Alice with an icy gaze while I was in a stupor. It tasted even worse than the last time I drank this. This girl actually needs to drink three to four cans of this a day?

"How is it? Do you feel that your thoughts are getting clearer?"

"No."

Alice seemed rather displeased, drinking the leftover drink at the side of her table.

"Get another three cans over here."

As though she was protesting to me, drinking three cans that were 1.4 liters in total, all in one go. Then, she continued:

"Then let me tell you something so your mind will be clearer. Do you know why I didn't ask for payment from the client Kousaka Yukari?"

"How would I know……"

I nearly forgot before she mentioned that, but she indeed did not speak of anything about the investigation fee.

"Why?"

"Firstly, Kousaka Yukari does not have the ability to pay as she's just a high school student. Secondly, isn't this your request as well? Isn't the fortress that is going to be taken away yours as well?"

"You're right, but……"

"Thirdly, you have the ability to pay. Didn't I pay you your wages a few days ago?"

The investigation fee that Alice asked for at that moment was so expensive that it's scary. So she asks for such a large fee each time! Or am I just clueless about the fees? Hiring a detective might be as expensive as this. But I did indeed get my pay a few days ago, so I can still pay the money.

"Don't you wish to solve the mystery as well?"

"But even so, you don't need to expose Tetsu-senpai's……"

Exposing the truth of senpai's crimes. Do we really need to do it till this extent?

"Narumi, I already told you many times. A detective is a messenger of the dead, so the things that I do might hurt the living, and might shame the deceased; the things that we gain in the end might only be a meaningless consolation, or just restoring someone's reputation. But I must still—"

"Why can you still look as though nothing had happened!?"

I couldn't help but interrupt with a harsh tone. As before, even I, myself, wasn't sure who my anger was directed at, but I just felt that I was unable to continue to listen to Alice speak in that chilly, emotionless tone.

Just at that moment, I saw that the large eyes of the small NEET detective started to redden.

"I see! So I'm that cruel in your eyes, huh!? Thank you for telling me that!"

I really didn’t know how to answer.

That’s right, Alice had been friends with Tetsu-senpai long before I knew him.

How is it possible that she wouldn’t feel anything about this? That’s because, Alice had not mentioned even once from just now—

She didn’t mention Tetsu-senpai’s name.

“E- erm…… Alice, sorr—“

“Shut up, idiot!” Four cans flew in my direction. “I’m like that in your eyes anyways! I don’t care about that at all, so why would you need to apologize!?”

Sounds of metal rang around me. Alice stood straight on the bed, face flushed and trembling all over.

“Why don’t you clear things away already! The NEET detective who isn’t affected by anything is going to pierce holes in her companions’ past with her optical eyes that could even pierce through the truth!”

“I’m h—“

“There’s nothing that you can help with now. That point is the same as usual.”

Alice turned over to the monitor in a huff. I knelt on the cold floor, and had no other choice but to retract my arm that I extended towards Alice.

Isn’t it at these times— an assistant detective has to help from the side?

What in the world was I doing? Even if I vented my anger on Alice, it couldn’t help things.

Tetsu-senpai arrived shortly. The doorbell rang beside the bed.

Alice flashed the blue light as a response, and the door opened immediately.

“So Narumi is here too?”

Tetsu-senpai was wearing a T-shirt as usual, and said after walking to the entrance of the bedroom, glancing at Alice and I.

“The only thing is the matter mentioned in the phone?”

Alice nodded silently. That’s unusual, this girl could actually express her opinions with her mouth closed.

“Is that so? Then…… I have nothing to say.”

Nothing to say?

“Aren’t you going to explain anything?”

“Explain what? Didn’t you investigate already?”

“Hayano Tomohiko, died because of a heart attack because of your inhumane actions— someone proved that. Does that mean you admit all of it?”

“I dropped out already, so isn’t that okay? I wouldn’t have continued to study even if that incident didn’t happen. I just left school two or three months earlier, it’s no big deal.”

I stood up to question senpai, and I might have rushed forward to argue with him long ago if not for Alice grabbing my wrist.

“Really? Then I would like to know the details of what happened.”

“I refuse.”

Those words were like a devastating punch that could shatter one’s chin, stopping Alice’s words in their track.

“There’s nothing else about this matter, so stop digging here and there for information.”

“Does that mean you don’t have any willingness for cooperation?

Even for me?”

“Not only do I refuse to help out, if you dare to tell Narumi to poke around—“

Half though his words, Tetsu-senpai stuffed his hands into his pockets and glared at me ferociously. It felt as though my whole body was going to get flattened by his glare.

What is this? Is this person really Tetsu-senpai?

“I will unhesitatingly beat you up!”

The merciless words that Tetsu-senpai said rang in the room.

Is this person really Tetsu-senpai? The good-for-nothing gambler? The person who would smile to brush away small maters, but would give me a hand during critical moments?

He actually bullied a weak person and caused him to die?

Lies, those must be lies!

Crestfallen, I suddenly heard the sound of the door banged close. When I raised my head again, Tetsu-senpai had already disappeared.

“Senpai!”

I hurriedly rushed out to the corridors. But even though I flew down the stairs, I wasn’t in time. The atmosphere that was abnormally cold for May lingered at the gathering spot where everyone welcomed me warmly the place with large steel buckets, turned over beer crates and wooden stands.

I sat on the second step of the backstairs.

“…… Fujishima-san?”

Raising my head slowly because of someone’s voice, I saw Ayaka poking her head out of the kitchen backdoor.

“Ah…… You’re here……” I don’t want to let Ayaka see my depressed expression, so I shifted my gaze.

“Fujishima-san, you said you’re going to get the keys, but didn’t come back at all…… So I figured you might be over here.”

“…… I’m sorry.”

Ah, I remembered. As I was startled by the contents of the teachers’ conversation, I rushed directly out of school.

“What happened? The person called Tetsu-san left looking incredibly furious.”

“……. Nah. Nothing ha—“

How is it possible that nothing happened? And this matter might not be completely irrelevant to Ayaka.

I, who was helplessly dumb, learnt one thing last winter and this spring, sulking at a corner alone is just a waste of time.

The reason that I want to save the Gardening Club is to regain the winter that I went through with Ayaka.

But I couldn’t just say that directly. What should I say first? I finally said after pondering for some time:

“…… Do you know about the Gardening Committee?”

Ayaka shook her head. She doesn’t know? Or was the memory just sunk in her swamp of memories?

Then let’s start from that incident.

There was a Gardening Committee managed by the school once…… It was abolished after that because of a death incident…… And Tetsu-senpai was involved in the incident…… Though the Gardening Committee was abolished, its jobs were fully accepted by the Student Council, and thus the Gardening Club was born.

The Gardening Club was the place where Ayaka and I gave each other support— and it is going to vanish.

As though she was listening to a movie summary that she was completely disinterested in, Ayaka just nodded in response from time to time. Each time I spoke a word, heat seemed to dissipate slightly from my body.

“Then you’re planning to—“ Ayaka bit her lips lightly. “Think of a way to save the Gardening Club?”

When I nodded in response, Ayaka’s expression looked rather forlorn.

“Because it’s a club…… that you managed with me in the past?”

“What……?”

Though Ayaka wasn’t wrong, why is she asking about that now?

“Did you argue with Tetsu-san just because of this just now?”

“What do you mean by ‘just because’? This would mean that we won’t have any place to stay at now……”

A place that was important to us, a place where our fate started. I really don’t know how to explain this.

I suddenly recalled the armband that I kept in my pocket all this time. Would it help Ayaka to regain some memories if I hand it to her? But on the other hand, I felt terrified if it would not have any effect on her after I gave that to her, since the armband is too closely linked to Ayaka and I.

As Ayaka was about to say something, we heard footsteps coming. A shadow extended to my feet. I raised my head, seeing two silhouettes at the end of the alley.

“Alice called me just now, and I talked to Tetsu on the phone just now as well.”

Hiro-san walked quickly to me and sat on a large steel bucket, while Major walked to my side and put down his backpack. After glancing at Ayaka, he looked at me again.

“This is great. I have something to tell you, Vice-Admiral Fujishima. Can you please tell Alice about this?”

“Tell…… about what?”

“Concerning this case, we shall not assist Alice.”

I stared at Major blankly. Will not assist?

Hiro-san continued: “If you want to investigate about Tetsu, we will not help out.” “Tetsu said that he didn’t want anyone to investigate about him, so we plan to respect his wishes.”

“Even if it’s Alice’s request?”

“That’s right. But since it’s rather hard to say to her…… Please tell her about this.”

“Is Tetsu-senpai more important that Alice?”

I only realized the stupidity of my question after saying it. Hiro-san just smiled faintly.

“That’s not the problem. Though we might lose a client because of this, it’s much better than losing a companion, that’s all.”

Companion. That’s right, this isn’t a relationship that could be described by the word ‘friend’. Even so—

“Why don’t you guys tell this to Alice yourself!?”

The cold words that slipped out of my mouth surprised even myself. Hiro-san’s expression froze, and Major who was beside me sighed:

“…… That’s true. So sorry for asking you to do this.”

As Major walked past me after taking his backpack again, the kitchen backdoor opened suddenly.

“P- please wait for a moment!”

Major looked at Ayaka who just rushed out in surprise. I might be wearing the same expression as well, as Ayaka looked at me with her brows furrowed.

“Fujishima-san, this is just too much! Because—“

“…… Why?”

Of course, I know that I said something that I shouldn’t have said to Major and Hiro-san. But why is Ayaka angry?

“Alice would be sad too if they spoke of this directly to her! She’s really just a child, why? Why are you so cruel to her!? Why don’t you just tell her!”

Does she really think that Alice is just a child? What are you interrupting for when you obviously don’t remember anything! I nearly retorted in anger, but the words that I wanted to say froze in my mouth.

I really would forget sometimes. Of course, Alice is just a child—maybe not just a child– but she’s still a delicate girl. Ayaka was right. How would that help anyone if Major or Hiro-san told Alice directly that they refuse to help out?

After saying all that, Ayaka retreated to the kitchen with her face pale.

“…… Ah …… Ah, so- sorry! Though I actually don’t know anything……”

“It’s okay……”

I hurriedly stood up, biting my lips and grasping my thighs forcefully with my fingers.

“Sorry, it’s my fault. So sorry, Major.”

I couldn’t look him in the face, so I could only look at Major’s military boots with my head lowered.

“…… I’ll tell her.”

"Don't be like that…… We're the ones who feel sorry about this."

Hiro-san answered with his head lowered as well: "Sorry, asking for you to do something that you shouldn't."

I thought to myself: What's with this? No matter what serious incidents happened in the past, laughter could be heard in this alley.

"That's right, it's as you said, we chose Tetsu and not Alice this time."

"Do you all trust Tetsu-senpai that much?"

Facing my inquiries, Major and Hiro exchanged glances.

"You mean— do we think Tetsu wouldn't bully someone to death, is it?" Hiro-san asked in a questioning tone, while I nodded weakly in response.

"This doesn't matter at all."

Hiro-san's short but strong answer caused me to raise my head in surprise.

"We are all NEETs, so we only care about the present. As for how Tetsu was in the past, it's none of our business. I just believe that the Tetsu right now isn't that kind of person."

Hiro-san looked at Major.

"Even if Tetsu-san is running away right now because of a murder, I would hide him with all my effort as well. If Tetsu-san is planning to kill someone, I would stop him with all my effort right now. That's why we're kin."

Kin. Companion.

Then what would Alice be to these two?

But I think that's a question that's off-limits— I spoke, but the things that I said was other thoughts.

"…… Then, I choose Alice and not Tetsu-senpai."

Not a friend, not a companion, it's something that could not be said in words—

Alice is a detective, while I'm an assistant detective.

"I know."

Hiro-san nodded in answer. Some sorrow showed on his face, like a lily that hasn't bloomed.

"But that doesn't mean that we're going against her. Please tell Alice to just tell us directly if she wants us to investigate something other than Tetsu-san's past."

After saying that, Major immediately turned around and waved to me, walking away from the alley between the buildings with Hiro-san.

It can't be said that I'm standing on Alice's side, right? When the silhouettes of the two left, I suddenly thought— actually Alice is the one who's helping me. If I withdraw my request, Alice would not need to continue to dig out the words of the deceased, and wouldn't need to worry that she would hurt Tetsu-senpai.

But……

I raised my head, and coincidentally met Ayaka's uneasy gaze as she was tightly holding onto the kitchen backdoor.

To me, there's something that I have to protect as well. Even if Ayaka had long forgotten how important those things are, even if it's only a mirage that exists only in my heart.

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From the following day onwards, I would ask Ayaka to work in my stead at Hanamaru Ramen when I'm busy with my work as an assistant detective.

“Ayaka is indeed ten thousand times more useful than you.”

That’s the same as Min-san originally thought. It seems that my chances of unemployment increased again, but it doesn’t matter.

“If Min-san doesn’t mind using me……”

Though Ayaka was rather hesitant, she still accepted my request.

Ayaka seemed to look forward to meeting Alice and Min-san as well. She might really recall Hanamaru Ramen if she keeps working there. I simply finished the work for the Gardening Club, thinking of this while looking as Ayaka left.

But there are many things that would eventually disappear if you just leave it there, so I can’t stop.

That day, I went to the Student Council Inspection office.

“Fujishima-kun? Have you found out about anything?”

Kousaka-senpai stayed alone in the dark, deserted Inspection office, and small books of past meeting minutes were piled on the table, while the monitor of an old model word processor was blinking piteously. Hustle and bustle from the office separated by bookshelves could be heard, which was in sharp contrast with the deserted feeling here.

“…… Is there only a person in the Inspection?”

“Not really. There’s actually five people, but the rest of them aren’t really interested in the job except for me.”

That’s why Kaoruko-senpai would do as she like.

“That’s right, didn’t you say that a senpai from the Inspection is in Hirasaka-gumi? Ah, Hirasaka-gumi would be the black T-shirt gang.”

“Eh? Ah, mnn. He’s Miyabe-senpai.”

“That person should know more about the things when the Gardening Committee is still around, right?”

Senpai nodded in response. I asked Kousaka-senpai to introduce me to Miyabe-senpai, but since the case is quite troublesome, it would probably be hard to tell him clearly about what occurred even if I suddenly went to meet him.

After I thanked her and was about to leave the Inspection office, Kousaka-senpai halted me.

“What is it?” I turned over and asked.

“Erm…... Well……”

Senpai sat before the word processor and kept rubbing her hands.

“Sorry for asking you to investigate such a strange case. I’ve brought you quite some trouble for my children’s sake.”

“M- my children?”

“Ah, well…..” Kousaka-senpai used her hand to repeatedly fan her flushed cheeks. “Sorry, that wasn’t deliberate. There are some small cultural clubs that are facing abolishment, and many of them were founded when I was in first year, and I was in charge of inspecting them, so they feel like my own children.”

Ah, so that’s how things are. This person is the type that would swallow up the sorrowful things, shouldering them alone as well.

“Many people misunderstand that the Inspection exists just to abolish clubs.”

I nonchalantly shifted my gaze. Actually I thought so as well.

“In reality, we’re indeed in charge of the follow-up work after the abolishment of a club, so some senpais had said that our job is to abolish clubs in the past. But the truth isn’t like that…… The Management has a lot of power, so I think that protecting the small clubs that can’t protest is also the Inspection’s job.”

I couldn’t look Kousaka-senpai in the eye.

“So this was actually something that I had to solve myself. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head hurriedly.

“I didn’t help just because I accepted the request. I’d be troubled if the Gardening Club disappears as well. Senpai, please don’t worry too much about this. Alice accepted the request for me as well. She’s afraid that misfortune would land on a place where she doesn’t know.”

“The girl called Alice—“

Kousaka-senpai hesitated, looking up with her brows furrowed.

“— is a rather unusual girl, right?”

It felt as though she pondered some time for a suitable word to describe her, but it seems that she couldn’t find one. It’s actually more or less like that.

“How old is she? About eleven or twelve? Why is she nesting in a place like that to be a detective? Is she really a hikikomori NEET? What are her parents doing right now?”

“Ah…… Erm…... Well……”

So senpai didn’t ask Alice these questions the first time she saw her because she planned to ask me after that? Unfortunately, I don’t have answers for any of her questions.

“About these matters, I don’t know even one.”

Kousaka-san raised both her hands in a ‘banzai’ pose in surprise. That’s rather similar to Ayaka.

“You don’t know that? H…… How is that possible? It seemed that you were quite close to her, isn’t it strange that you don’t know about that?”

Is it really that strange? But when she said that, it really felt rather strange. Seemed that we were quite close? Having other people see us like that, it feels somewhat complicated. And actually I wasn't helping to take care of her just because I like it……

"Then why are you continuing to do that for her? Helping a girl to comb her hair too….."

"Mnn— well…… Because I'm an assistant detective?"

Whoops, I'm starting to feel that something is off as well, why must an assistant detective comb the hair of his boss!?

"Instead of saying that you're her assistant, aren't you more like her family?"

"Ohhh…… Nonononono!"

I couldn't defend myself against Kousaka-senpai's questions, and I might have said some strange things if the door behind me didn't open suddenly.

A hint of tension suddenly appeared on Kousaka-senpai's face. After turning my head around, I realized that Kaoruko-senpai was standing outside the door.

"What are you doing? Do you still have anything to do with the Inspection?"

I lowered my head, not answering Kaoruko-senpai's question. I wanted to walk out of the office directly, but then a voice came from my back.

"Fujishima-kun, please wait for a moment. Kaoruko-chan, please listen to m—"

Kaoruko-senpai looked at Kousaka-senpai the same time as myself. Kousaka-senpai covered the word processor, saying in a sincere tone:

"Actually, I'm asking Fujishima-kun to investigate…… the incident about your brother."

Kaoruko-senpai who was standing beside me widened her eyes.

“Why…… are you doing such a thing?”

“Because the Gardening Club was founded after that incident happened, and the budget was decided that time, so the two must be related somehow—“

“There’s absolutely no need for investigation!”

Kaoruko-senpai’s fingers were deeply clenched on her crossed arms, and she said while shaking her head.

“Don’t do these pointless things, okay?”

“It isn’t something pointless!”

Kousaka-senpai walked over one step after another, and I saw that there was a danger of tears spilling from her eyes.

“Kaoruko-chan, didn’t you find out a lot about this from the police that time? If it’s possible, please tell Fujishima-kun—“

“Get out!”

Kaoruko-senpai suddenly grabbed the collar of my uniform, dragging me out to the corridor.

“Don’t meddle in meaningless things anymore! The meeting is on the twenty fifth, please tidy up the Gardening Club before then!”

Kaoruko-senpai forcefully pushed me out of the door, locking the door to the Inspection office with a bang, so that my view would be blocked. The sounds of vigorous dispute came from the other side of the door.

I retreated to the windows, silently waiting for the pain because of Kaoruko-senpai’s forceful push to fade. Now I understand, is this what they call the messenger for the dead? Being hated no matter you’re in or out of a grave. How many times had Alice repeated this, and how many times had she been scolded?

I think Kaoruko-senpai would definitely refuse to speak to me about her brother. Though it might help the case if I could hear something, the wound that was left because of the leaving of someone precious might not close up. I understand this the most, because even though that person is back, my pain has not faded even now.

The meeting of the Student Council is scheduled on the twenty fifth of this month, and the place where Ayaka and I supported each other is going to be closed down after about two weeks. I really can’t bear to stop at this time.

Right after I walked out of the school entrance, the ringtone of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ rang. I supported my bike by the school door, taking out my phone.

‘Narumi? Don’t come here today first, go to—‘

“Yeah, I’m going to Hirasaka-gumi right now.”

Alice was speechless for a moment, how unusual.

‘…… Your recent diligence is rather disgusting, what happened? Maybe you’re afraid that not only your job at the ramen shop, but even your job as an assistant detective would be taken by Ayaka?’

Why did you say that I’m disgusting……!

“You said that this case is my own case yourself, right?”

‘That isn’t wrong. I feel rather happy about this. Okay, relax. Though Ayaka is a hundred million times more considerate about small details than you, she doesn’t have the talent to do a manzai, so she can’t have the job of an assistant.’

“So an assistant’s job is to do tsukkomis with the boss……?”

‘Don’t you think so?’

No, I should’ve known that earlier, right?

‘I investigated the personal information of those four dropouts in detail, and there’s quite a lot, so I sent them directly to the inbox at Hirasaka-gumi.’

“…… Tetsu-senpai is among them?”

‘Of course.’

“Can I really read them? Those are all senpai’s privacy……”

‘Hearing you say that, does that mean you can just read information other than Tetsu?’

“Ehh…… Ahh…… Not really……”

Those are indeed his privacy. To be honest, I’ve seen the personal information of total strangers being exposed by Alice’s side, it’s just that the one that’s exposed is coincidentally Tetsu-senpai this time. Realizing about this at this time is really already too late.

‘As long as you have the confidence that you could still hang out and laugh together with everyone, including Tetsu, after the case has finished, then just read it.’

When the case has finished—

Can the days of the past still return?

“…… Alice, do you have that confidence?”

‘Of course. If not, I wouldn’t be able to be a NEET detective. Knowing would indicate death, every file that I found out through a search engine are my bones.’

I somewhat regret discussing this topic with Alice on the phone, since I can’t see her expression. Are those her usual banter, or did she just conceal her immense sadness with her flowery words?

Now— which is it?

“Hey, Alice.”

‘Mnn?”

“I’m really okay. Only I—“

I switched the phone to my other hand, sighed and continued:

“— won’t leave, and wouldn’t hate you if I know the cruel truth. I will always be by your side.”

All of a sudden, only the sounds of the cooling fans in the computers could be heard on the receiver.

Eh? That’s odd. Did I say something that I shouldn’t? I thought that Alice was feeling downcast because her NEET companions kept their distance from her as she was determined to continue the investigation, which was why I wanted to use my own way to comfort her.

‘W- wh……’

I finally heard Alice’s unusually high-pitched voice.

‘What are you blabbering about all of a sudden!?’

Since her voice was rather piercing, I couldn’t help but distance the receiver from my ears a bit.

‘Why can’t you get this clear? Wh- what about me? What are you talking about? Staying by my side is a given, you’re my assistant!’

“Erm…… Sorry. But why are you so flustered?”

‘I’m not flustered! Don’t just stand there speaking nonsense, hurry up and go to the office! If you’re slower, the machine idiots team would break the computer, eating my email like black goats!’

The phone was hung up harshly. I stared at the silent phone for awhile, turning it around in my palm. What’s with that girl?

Troubled, I tilted my head while stuffing my phone back into my pockets, riding my bike away.

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The road extended from the large station like a vein, after climbing the slope that was connected to a TV station at the leftmost spot and turning left into a small alley, a broken down building could be seen. The third and fourth floor of the building would be the office of Hirasaka-gumi.

As the sworn brother that underwent the sake ceremony with their leader Yondaime, I had some understanding about how the young yakuza gang was founded.

Yondaime left his home at Kansai, arriving at Tokyo for quite some time now, and he once got along with a man similar to his age way before he knew Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san. They were the most powerful ones in the city at that time— some higher leveled lackeys in Hirasaka-gumi told me excitedly, an embarrassing title called the 'Four Heavenly Kings' was once spread among the hot-blooded delinquents. One of the two remaining ones is Tetsu-senpai, while the last— and the strongest one of them, seemed to be the shop owner of a ramen shop somewhere, but I might be mistaken about that. Why does these people like to have the strongest titles, names and things like that?

Anyways, Yondaime and his pal gathered the good-for-nothings in the whole city in a flash. Yondaime's family had a business, though it doesn't seem so by his appearance, he's actually a person with constructive thoughts; and he uses violence to guide others as well. He's very clear about this: As long as you give a set amount of people a direction, it might have an economical effect.

Just like that, a gang that gathers juvenile delinquents was born. Constantly gathering NEETs who were expelled from school, roaming the street, the gang grew and now became a force that even real yakuza gangs have to note— that's what they said.

The other man who once set the base for the gang, who was also Yondaime's inseparable friend— disappeared not long after that.

The reason for that wasn't clear, and only his name was left on the signboard of the gang.

The nameplate on the letterbox of the first floor had 'Hirasaka' written on it. I closely observed Hirasaka-gumi's emblem that was exactly the same as the family emblem of the prestigious family during the olden times of Japan, 'Heishi', which was a swallowtail butterfly as well…… The reason that I'm thinking about these is just because the elevator still hadn't come down. Did it break down again?

It really can't be helped, I think it's better if I just use the emergency stairs. As I was about to walk out, I met a man in a black T-shirt on the streets.

"Oh? Is there anything— oh, isn't that the uniform of M High?"

His hair was like a porcupine, and was bleached in an exaggerated way, quite an unusual type in Hirasaka-gumi.

"Ah? Would you be Fujishima?"

After he suddenly said that, I nodded in surprise.

"Ahhh, mnn, Yukari-chan called me before this. And then Sou-san suddenly called me over, I wondered what was wrong."

Yukari-chan— does that mean Kousaka-senpai? Which means……

"Erm…… Are you Miyabe-senpai who was once in the Inspection?"

Kousaka-senpai said before this that though he was once in the Student Council, he became a NEET because he failed to get in a college. I couldn't imagine how he looks like, so he looks like this?

"Yes yes yes! Wow, you're actually a second year in our school. You could even address Sou-san as a brother, that's amazing!"

While climbing the stairs, I heard Miyabe-senpai speak. It seems that he just joined the gang, and his understanding of myself is only from rumors. That's why Kousaka-senpai heard those untruths.

“Yukari-chan…… how is she in the Inspection? Did Hayano bully her? Before I graduated, she almost threw all of the work in Inspection to Yukari-chan, she isn’t still shouldering all the responsibilities herself, is she?”

“W- well…… She seems okay……”

Since Miyabe-senpai’s predictions were all spot on, that pained me a bit.

“Is that so? That’s fine. That girl is the type that would worry about the others even though she, herself, could not go on, and finally cause herself to be unable to move.”

The situation right now is just at senpai said.

“So you’re investigating the Gardening Committee, right? That girl is really has a life of hard work.”

I was rather uneasy about Miyabe-senpai’s casual attitude. After climbing to the fourth floor, I walked into the rather eerie room.

“Good morning, everyone!” Senpai casually said.

There were about five or six black-shirted men in the office. A table was in the center of the room, while the two sofas that were placed opposite to each other were full of people. There are always so much people waiting here every time I’m here. Is it because this is their job or they’re just too free?

Though I saw Pole (Two meters tall) who was Yondaime’s bodyguard, the main point is their boss isn’t at the desk at the innermost of the room.

“Oh, aniki, thanks for your hard work!”

“Thanks for your hard work!”

Completely ignoring Miyabe-senpai’s greetings, they stood up and bowed to me. Can you stop doing that? Doing that every time…… Miyabe-senpai showed a rather startled expression, and he looked as though the stock that he was carrying suddenly turned into a venomous snake.

“W- well……”

I didn’t know what to say, so I could only shift my gaze from Miyabe-senpai to Pole.

“Is Yondaime here today?”

“Sou-san is out right now.”

“Ah, that’s right, aniki, the computer kept beeping just now, so I used the way that you taught me, hammering the power switch sixteen times, telling it to shut up!”

I didn’t tell you that! I told you not to touch the power switch when the computer is running! That was probably the email that Alice sent here, are the contents still complete……?

I was invited into the study beside the desk.

The room was used as a restroom and a store, so it was full of dust; it feels as though the cardboard boxes increase every time I come here. I felt like tidying up this place for them, but I’m not a member of the gang after all.

Hirasaka-gumi’s computer was placed on a small table by a bed. Good thing Alice’s email was still alright. I hurriedly printed out the files attached to the email. Apart from Tetsu-senpai’s information, I browsed through the other contents. Not even one of them still lived at their old home, so there’s no address to check out. Alice added on the information that she asked Yondaime to help with the investigation as well.

“Ohh, aniki, who are these people on the list? The people that we’re going to beat up next?”

“Uwaa! Please don’t look at the contents!”

I hastily snatched the information from Pole’s hands.

“……. So- sorry!”

Pole's huge body seemed to shrink in depression. After updating the softwares that hadn't been updated, I checked the other mails as well.

"Fujishima, so you're the one handling our computer?" Miyabe-senpai looked at me from behind.

"Oi, Miyabe! Don't call aniki's name directly!" "Aniki is Sou-san's brother, you know!"

"Eh? Ah, right…… Sorry."

"E- erm…… It's fine, really, so don't mind about it."

Actually I want to listen to Miyabe-senpai's explanation earlier, but Pole stayed in the study for some reason, so I couldn't really say anything.

"I heard you're about two years younger than Tetsu-senpai?"

"That's right, so I'm probably four years older than you, Fujishima."

"Oi, Miyabe! Didn't I tell you not to answer as you like? Aniki, sorry for this, it's all our fault."

Pole, can you stop interrupting already?

"That incident probably happened in winter, right?"

"It's in December…… Ah, it happened in December, about four years ago." Miyabe-senpai said politely to Pole.

"Aniki, he said that it's in December four years ago." Pole repeated to me.

"Are you in school when the incident happened, Miyabe-senpai? I've heard that it happened on about five after school."

"No, I went home already." Senpai said to Pole again.

Pole: "He said that he went home already, aniki."

"Then…… that means, you don't know anything about the incident, right?”

“I’ve heard of it from other people, so I know a bit about it.”

“He said that he knows a bit, aniki.”

Please! Pole, can you please shut up already?

Being troubled by a mystifying honorifics attack, I still managed to get some information, the incident would be…… on a snowy Wednesday before the winter break, about half past five in the afternoon. Hayano Tomohiko was found collapsed beside a wall not far from the right part of M High School’s entrance, and there were signs of blood around it. Though the victim was immediately sent to the hospital for treatment, he still died that night because of a sudden heart failure.

The ones who found out that something was wrong were some delinquents who often gathered at the Gardening Committee, and one of them was Ichinomiya Tetsuo who was not in the Gardening Committee. According to their testimonies, they were led by Ichinomiya Tetsuo who was the first person who found the victim, forcing the sick Hayano Tomohiko to jog somewhere to buy something with his upper body bare, using the excuse of ‘training his body’ to repeatedly bully the victim in many ways.

When Miyabe-senpai said till this part, Pole grabbed senpai’s collar even faster than me.

“How would Tetsu-ojiki do such a thing!?”

The tip of Miyabe-senpai’s feet were raised about two centimeters from the floor. Seeing senpai suffocating because of his neck being throttled, legs flailing non-stop, I hurriedly went forward to halt him.

“P- please don’t do that!”

Pole tutted in annoyance while unwillingly throwing Miyabe-senpai onto the bed.

“Bu- but…… Tetsu-senpai said that himself……”

Miyabe-senpai explained while coughing.

That’s right. I sank into despair, sitting down on the chair once again. Tetsu-senpai admitted it himself……

But then— why doesn’t he want anyone to investigate?

“However, he didn’t get arrested by the police.”

Even the police couldn’t prove that he did anything. Even so, the students that were rumored to mistreat other students dropped out of school; while the Gardening Committee faced abolishment.

If there’s any other secret that Tetsu-senpai doesn’t want people to know of, that would probably be—

Perhaps he did really commit a crime? How is that possible? Or maybe he didn’t die due to mistreatment, but some other reason caused Hayano Tomohiko to die, and he did that just to hide the truth?

I covered my mouth with my hand, swallowing the terrible imagination. It’s useless even if I imagine these kind of things now. Additionally, there are some suspicious that we have to clear up right now.

I thought of something to chase Pole out of the study, then started to ask again.

“And then…… the Gardening Club was founded for some reason, right?”

Miyabe-senpai nodded while answering:

“I was still a rookie Inspector that time, so I wasn’t clear how the Management dealt with the matter. However, the money that was originally given by the school then given by the Student Council, and a new club that completely inherits the jobs of the Gardening Committee was founded. I think that affected the budgets of the other clubs more or less, so there’s probably some effect that time. The one who talked things out with the people in the staffroom would probably be a superior in the Student Council, right?”

“Is this even possible?”

“They’ve succeeded. That couldn’t be helped. I asked my senpais in the Inspection about the same question as well. It’s actually just that the teachers want to have an explanation for the outsiders, and it would be even trickier to clear away the flowerbeds or the greenhouse. So if there’s a request from the Student Council, saying that they want to open a new club to handle the job, they can’t say no. Since the students who caused the trouble left school after all.”

No matter what, this was probably done by an extremely motivated leader in the Student Council.

“…… By the way, might it be done by the leader of the Inspection?”

I think I’m asking too much.

“Ah— that’s possible as well, it seemed like he was rather friendly with the delinquents in the Gardening Committee. I heard that he was one of the pioneer members when the Gardening Club was first founded. I remember that he liked to trouble the teachers…… But he left school in the end. I wonder what’s he doing right now…… It doesn’t seem that he went to college or something.”

The pioneer members of the Gardening Club?

That would mean— it’s almost confirmed that this guy did it?

“T- that person is?”

“Eh? Ahh, hmm…… I think it’s Minagawa-san…… His full name is probably Minagawa Kengo. But I’m not sure of how to contact him.”

“Ahh, that’s okay. I just need the name.” I’ll leave the rest to Alice.

I rushed out of the office after thanking senpai, and coincidentally met Yondaime who was walking upstairs. A bodyguard that looked somewhat like a wall was standing behind him— Rocky.

“Aniki, thanks for your hard work!”

“You’re done with Miyabe already?”

“Ah, y- yes! Thank you very much.”

“It seems like you’re running here and there recently.”

“As a NEET, aniki is unusually serious.” Rocky added. I’m telling you that I’m not a NEET……

“Well, I didn’t really do anything notable actually.”

“I know that, I wasn’t praising you, and what you do is usually in vain, isn’t that right? Running here and there enthusiastically, and getting satisfied because of this. A classic idiot who likes to waste his time.”

I felt rather annoyed because of his words, but I couldn’t refute him since what he said is the truth.

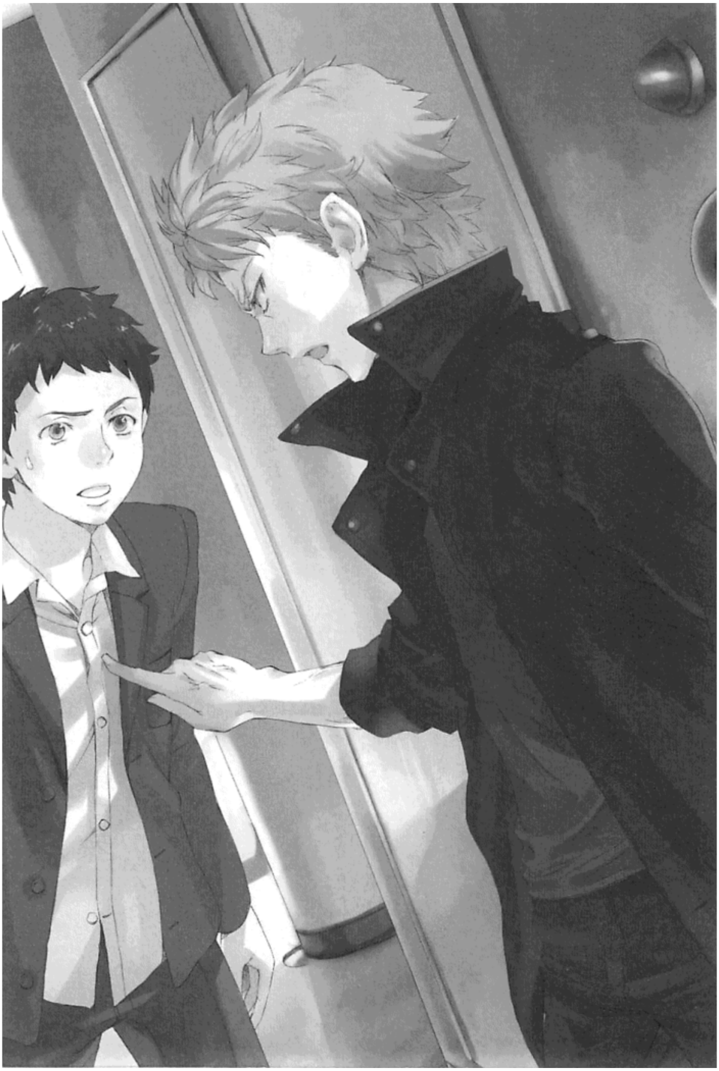
“Miyabe wasn’t present at that time anyways, why are you here just to listen to him? Why don’t you just go and ask Tetsu?”

“But, if then—“

Why is he saying such things? Yondaime knows this, Tetsu-senpai said that he wouldn’t say anything.

“Those are Tetsu’s own thoughts, right? What does that have to do with you? If there’s a need—“

Yondaime stepped closer to me, pressing a finger forcefully on my chest. It felt just like a sharp ice pillar.



"— you should ask him even if you have to punch him for it."

I couldn't answer him. The reason that Yondaime could say such a thing is because he's as strong as Tetsu-senpai. But I don't have that strength.

"Who says that you have to win against him in a fight? I said that you just have to give him a punch."

"…… Is there a difference?"

"If you can't tell the difference, that means you're an idiot. Just run around like an idiot then!"

"I think it's better if I stay like that. Erm…… Can you locate the other dropouts other than Tetsu-senpai? Almost all of them left their home now, so we don't know where they are. The namelist is in the computer."

"I'll try."

"So sorry for troubling you."

As I was about to walk down the stairs:

"Oi, Gardening Club kid! Wait a sec."

After pushing Rocky into the office, he threw something to me, and I only realized that it was a triangular cloth when I caught hold of it. I forgot when, but there was some embroidery similar to the ones on Ayaka's. I was confused, looking at the cloth that was probably sewn by Yondaime himself, and looked at him again.

"That's for you, remember to tie it on your head. That would cure your idiot sickness."

"Thank you *so* much for that!"

Did he really spend the night finishing that so that he could make fun of me? I'm so touched because of this…

*

It was almost time for the ramen shop to open by the time I arrived. Min-san's silhouette could be seen at the other side of the half-open iron sliding door. She was wiping the counters with her ponytail swaying around.

“Oh, just at the right time. Ayaka is probably still at Alice’s, so go and tell her that it’s almost time to open the shop. The customers are increasing recently, so it’s rather tiring doing this alone!”

Min-san said that, not even glancing at me.

“Oka—“ Eh? Wait a minute! “Erm…… Aren’t I supposed to be an employee as well?”

“Huh? Who are you? Our shop never employed a male employee before this.”

I nearly wept. Though I know that it’s reasonable if I’m fired because of my recent performance……

“You seem very busy as well! If Ayaka returns, wouldn’t that help you as well?”

“T- that’s right……”

“So you’re fired. Thanks for your hard work!”

“Can’t you say this any other way!?”

“Keep out of my territory.”

“That’s even crueler!”

I climbed up the backstairs while being laughed at by Min-san. When I entered the NEET Detective Agency, Ayaka and Alice were sitting on the bed. Seeing Alice sitting obediently on Ayaka’s thigh, being combed, a nostalgic feeling surged from the depths of my heart.

Thanks to Alice and Min-san, Ayaka can come here by herself now.

Then, I hope the school and the Gardening Club can restore her memories of me.

“Min-san asked me to tell you that it’s about time to open the shop.”

“Ah, right, sorry. It’s going to be done soon.”

Ayaka gently combed Alice’s silky hair, conditioners and what nots spread on the bed.

“It’s all Ayaka’s fault, making me bathe every two days. It’s really troublesome.”

Alice said while pouting.

“Alice, you should take care of your skin and your hair since they’re so beautiful.”

“Even if I take care of them, who would feel happy because of this?”

“Everyone would feel happy. Right, Fujishima-san?”

“Eh? Huh? Ah, yeah!”

Can you not suddenly focus on me?

“Narumi, don’t just stand there and discuss meaningless topics. Dr. Pepper and the report! Hurry up!”

Okay, okay. I took out a can from the fridge, handing the note with the news by Miyabe-senpai to Alice. There are still some things that I couldn’t understand just by looking at the information. Though I had wanted to tidy up the contents first, in the end I still chose to tell Alice about all of it first.

“…… Mnn, I get it.”

Alice handed the note back to me after listening to my explanation.

“Don’t you need it?”

“Isn’t Tetsu’s personal information printed on the other side of the paper? Remember not to use these things to jot things down after this.”

Whoops.

“So you still didn’t look at the contents?”

“…… Yeah.”

I still felt that I couldn’t look at Tetsu-senpai’s privacy.

“That doesn’t really matter. Though it’s true that you could see what I missed sometimes, but from the meaning of words, those are physical visual assets. In the sea of knowledge and information, you are only a dumb fish that couldn’t even see your own tail.”

“Sorry……”

“You said that the Head Inspector might be involved in this…… right?”

When I nodded in response, Alice furrowed her brows.

“I recall that I’ve seen the name of the Head Inspector before this.”

Alice remembers this person? Would that be because Tetsu-senpai told her that? As Ayaka was still combing Alice’s hair, Alice pulled the moveable table by her computer desk to her side, then typed on the computer to bring out a the window of a search engine on one of her monitors. Sounds of typing that were like machine guns rang in the room.

“According to the student handbook of your school, opening a new club must pass the Inspector’s trials. As for the rude and puzzling process of the opening of the Gardening Club, the involvement of the Head Inspector is quite probable. It’s like he’s looking at a club that he’s already decided to open. If this happens nowadays, it would be a huge joke.”

“Rude and puzzling?”

Ayaka who was behind Alice stopped combing, and her face fell. Though she didn’t really understand what we were discussing about, Ayaka was rather sensitive about the words Gardening Club that kept appearing in the conversation, so she couldn’t just ignore it.

"The club that you and Narumi are in is shrouded in mysteries." Alice used the back of her head to lightly bump Ayaka's chest while saying: "Do you remember a third year senpai when you first joined the Gardening Club in first year? Did you hear anything from him? There must be some students who joined the club at the same time as the Head Inspector, right?"

Being asked a whole lot of questions, Ayaka looked at Alice and shook her head after closing her eyes looking rather forlorn. Even if she heard anything— she probably doesn't remember it.

"Is that so? That's fine." Alice continued to pound on the keyboard, wearing an unconcerned expression on her face. "No matter what, the first party should understand that the most, so it's impossible that it's not connected."

"Does that mean he might know about Tetsu-senpai as well? We can ask him as long as we find him……"

"Basically, it's like tha— ahhh, no……"

The sounds of typing suddenly halted.

Alice stared weakly at the computer screen.

"…… Is there anything wrong?"

"It seems that we're too late, we can't question Minagawa Kengo about this now."

"Why?"

I approached the back of the bed, looking at the monitor that Alice was staring at. Quite a few windows were on the screen, and one of them had a photo of a man with small eyes, a square jaw, and a pale face that was about twenty, and the information about him.

"He's dead. What a joke."

Alice's words hammered Ayaka's head.

Among the words in one of the windows, two words were so clear to me as though they popped out of the screen. Choked breathing surged from the depths of my throat.

“Angel Fix.”

The red wings of angels that fragmented our winter, the crazily strong drug.

Why? Why? Why is this name here?

Since the group that made and dealt the drugs was closed down, the number of people who died because of the drug shot up. Apparently, they hurt themselves because of the withdrawal of the drug. There were already thirty people in this city alone. Their names weren’t in God’s notebook, so the sorrowful people attempted to add it in with their own blood. Most of those people did not continue their studies or work, drifting meaninglessly in the night city— NEETs.

Minagawa Kengo’s name was among them.

“Ayaka, ouch! It hurts!”

Alice suddenly shouted. I turned around, seeing the pale Ayaka with her eyes glued to the screen, tightly hugging Alice until the back of her hands turned white.

“Ah, no, no……. Noooo…….!”

A terrifying sound was emitted from Ayaka’s half-open mouth, her eyes that had lost their radiance were staring at the words ‘Angel Fix’ that caught my attention just now. I pounced on Ayaka, shaking her shoulders frantically, trying to pull her away from Alice.

“Ayaka, calm down! Please calm down!”

“N……No! Nooo—!”

A piteous scream echoed through the cold room. Ayaka buried her face in Alice’s hair, her back convulsing repeatedly. Her force was so big that I could almost hear the sounds of Alice’s bones fracturing. I tried to stick my arm between them both, but was violently pushed down the bed.

“No! N- no! D- don’t come here! NO! Ah…… Ahh……!”

Ayaka finally let go of Alice, but she was curled up on the bed, starting to scratch the bed sheets and her own arms. Alice coughed while saying:

“Narumi, wrap her in the carpet so that her hands can’t move!”

Being frozen, I sprang up and forcibly wrapped Ayaka’s hands with the carpet.

“Master, sorry, but it’s an emergency. Can you come up here immediately?”

I heard Alice’s hoarse voice on the phone, looking at Ayaka whose lips were trembling non-stop, color drained from her face. It was like the bruises that were like the battle attire of native people that appeared last winter morning surfaced below her eyes again— the reddish black bags under her eyes. My back trembled as though it was about to break, but those were actually hallucinations. Opening my eyes after closing them for awhile, I saw that Ayaka’s face was just pale. She widened her eyes while looking at me. Perhaps she had a hallucination, seeing me after taking the Angel Fix, the chilling markings—I saw that her gaze froze because of terror.

I don’t even know who to curse now.

Ayaka still retained some memories. Nothing disappeared, it’s just that the thread that tied it was cut, and it was buried deeply in the swamp of memories.

But they’ve linked now in this way.

I caught hold of Ayaka’s hands forcibly on the carpet. If I didn’t do that, I’m afraid that I would have problems as well. I couldn’t even differentiate whether the moans that resounded in the room were mine or Ayaka’s. Standing below the air vent of the air conditioner, I waited while biting my lips forcefully.

Suddenly, I felt someone beside me. If not because of the stream of heat, I might have hugged my own head, collapsing on the bed with my eyes closed.

After raising my head, I saw Alice standing by my side, tightly holding the sleeve of my shirt, gazing at Ayaka’s face with her eyes that were as dark as the deep sea.

Chapter 3

It’s hard to believe that there would be a day that I would feel depressed to go to Hanamaru Ramen.

That’s because the ramen shop right now doesn’t have its usual warmth. Having said those words, Tetsu-senpai probably wouldn’t go there for quite some time now. Major and Hiro-san probably feel awkward, so they wouldn’t go. Coupled with Min-san’s stern expression when she was asked by Alice to take care of Ayaka yesterday, I don’t feel like going just by thinking of that.

But there’s still a reason that I have to go there.

“Do you really have to go?”

Sayuri-sensei sat on the teacher’s chair in the greenhouse, a lonely expression on her face. The seat at my side was empty because of Ayaka’s absence as well. That means the supplementary class would end for the day when I leave.

“I originally planned to teach you all of the English grammar from the third semester too, what a pity……”

Can you please not speak such scary words with such a piteous gaze? The unmarried Sayuri-sensei was often said to be a widow, because of her unique maturity, but she was actually more like an innocent college student up till now. I know that you’re worried about my grades, but……

“Then I’ll give you a lot of homework!” After saying that, she immediately stuck a note on my pocket again.

“Do I really have to wear this?”

“Yes.” Sayuri-sensei smiled while taking out the clothes peg. I still have a lot of places to go to……

I slowly rode my bike, passing through a road, going past the police station, a whole row of empty houses of vagrants arranged at my left. I rode along the steel road to an alley that was surrounded by blocks of short buildings. I started to feel depressed when I faintly saw the portiere of Hanamaru Ramen, and my feet that were pedaling started to turn heavier as well.

At least let there be someone waiting at the space behind the kitchen backdoor—

“Judging from Major’s personality, it must be a bluff. Show! Two pair!”

“What a pity, mine is three card. Tetsu-san, you’re too naïve.”

“Ahhh, why didn’t you change even though you have three card!?”

“Because Hiro-san and Tetsu-san just changed a card, that’s a basic tactic.”

“Major, sorry for saying this while you’re happily explaining away, but mine is a straight flush.”

“Why……!?”

“Why is my line! Why are you three over here!?”

I couldn’t help but say. Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro-san who were surrounding a wooden stand playing poker turned around and looked at me at the same time.

“So it’s just Narumi. Don’t talk to me right now, I’ve just lost twenty thousand yen!”

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, please stand behind the super lucky Hiro-san and signal to me his cards with semaphore.”

“I’ve asked the girls out, treating them to roast meat. Are you going too, Narumi-kun?”

Hearing Hiro-san say so, Tetsu-senpai and Major acted like a king kong and a gorilla respectively, repeatedly hitting their chests. I really didn’t know what to say, so I could only squat down behind the kitchen backdoor.

What's with these people? They're the same as usual.

Just at that moment, the door at my back suddenly opened. I flopped directly onto the ground after being punched.

"Oi, Narumi. Just ignore these mites(dani) of the community, hurry up and help out in the shop! Didn't Ayaka take sick leave today?"

Min-san looked at me with a cold expression. Didn't you say that you fired me just yesterday!?

"Oi, we were called mites."

"But it seems that we're not fleas in the community."

"Maybe mite sounds cooler?"

In the end, the three started to sing the Ireland folk song 'Danny(dani) Boy' at the same time.

"…… Why are the three of them here?"

I asked Min-san while taking off my blazer, putting on an apron.

"Why do you ask that……?"

Min-san tilted her head while stirring the food in her large pot, and it was like her expression said: what is this guy talking about?

"Min-san, you know it as well, right? Tetsu-senpai refused Alice's request, while Major and Hiro-san wouldn't help out in the case—"

"Those are two different matters, aren't they? They're not related at all."

"What does that mean? Not related……?" But really, it does seem that they're unrelated. Even if they don't assist Alice in investigation, they don't need to stay away from Hanamaru Ramen. But this is still……

"…… I can't separate them that well."

“Is that so? Tetsu and Hiro just went to see Alice just now too. I heard that they got a gift from playing pachinko, and there’s a doll that Alice would like.”

I even thought that ‘healthy’ words like pachinko gifts can’t be linked with Tetsu-senpai. So that’s not all, they even went to see Alice? What are they thinking of……?

“You’re the one who’s thinking too much.” After saying that, Min-san threw a cabbage to me. I caught the cabbage and washed it, cutting it while muttering:

“Is that so? Alice must mind it a lot, right?”

“About what you’re thinking of, she doesn’t really mind about that.”

My jaw dropped, and I stared blankly at the side of Min-san’s face.

“The thing that she’s concerned of is that Tetsu might be arrested because of her investigations…… Meaningless matters like that. She doesn’t care if they’re helping her or not. This is also the only merit of those community mites.”

Min-san who was looking at her pot suddenly raised her head and smiled at me.

“She’s just worried about other people. If she’s a person who just worries for herself, she wouldn’t be living in a rubbish dump like that ages ago.”

I held the kitchen knife, not moving.

So that’s why. Min-san was right.

The reason that some NEETs whose lives are facing despair can enjoy themselves together is probably because there’s someone by their side worrying for their future— even though they look as if they don’t care about it.

Of course, many NEETs aren’t that lucky as well. When those people are alone in a cold night, they might grasp the merciless hand of the ‘red angel’.

Minagawa Kengo might have been one of them.

Dropping out of school in the middle of high school, drifting to a dark corner in the city, the body and mind falling onto the asphalt road—

And then they met the ‘angel’.

I once experienced a small part of what the drug could bring. The only word that could express the feeling— though I really really feel that it’s extremely dumb, there’s truly only one word that could describe it…… that is ‘love’.

It felt as though the whole world loved yourself, imagining that the whole world would accept yourself.

I think that nobody in this world could live on without having these fantasies. Because of that, many people committed suicide when the supply of love by ‘fix’ stopped when the flowers that Ayaka planted disappeared and Hakamizaka died. A person who tried the drug would know the whole truth during the instant when he wakes up.

The whole world doesn’t love him at all.

But I still came back. Thanks to Alice and Ayaka’s help.

“—mi! Oi, Narumi!”

I was slapped, and was brought back to the kitchen that was full of heat from the sea of memories. The first thing that came into my view was Min-san’s brows that were arched in anger.

“Eh? Ah, erm…… Thanks to your help as well?”

“What gibberish are you spouting? Alice ordered something, hurry up and send it there!”

Min-san handed a bowl of bean sprouts ramen without meat or noodles on a plate to me, then knocked me on the back with her knees. That hurts……

“Look, most cat dolls in the market are quite ugly, but this could be said as a chef d'oeuvre! Good thing Tetsu saved it out from the gift cupboard in the pachinko shop, I really don’t know how to thank him.”

A broad smile was Alice’s face, repeatedly showing off the present that Tetsu-senpai gave her. Just like that, a new kitten joined the doll army on her bed. I see, so this girl really doesn’t mind.

“What’s with that gaze? Perhaps you have something to say about me naming the cat Patronius”

“Not really.”

I placed the ramen bowl onto the moveable computer desk.

“Judging from your personality, you’re probably thinking about meaningless things because you saw that Tetsu and the others looked for me, right?”

“Mnn…… A little. I thought for a bit about problems about ‘love’.”

Alice’s expression looked as though she accidentally swallowed a bug. After staring at me for awhile with her large, bright eyes, she got off the bed, slowly walking to the kitchen. When she was back, her hands were full of Dr. Pepper, and she handed one of them to me.

“It is said that Dr. Pepper was originally sold as medicine, though I’m not sure if it’s effective as brain damage treatment.”

“Thank *you* for your concern!”

Alice who walked back to the bed shoveled the ramen and the drink in the dark red can in turn into her mouth while saying:

“Don’t think about these things that you don’t understand, you just have to take care of Ayaka and yourself.”

“I know that it’s the best if things can be like that……”

While sighing, I turned the cold can in my hands.

“How was Ayaka after that?”

Why are you asking me? Logically speaking, Alice would have asked Min-san or investigated herself, so she probably knows about Ayaka’s condition already, right?

But at that moment, I realized that she wanted me to speak.

“…… Her condition stabilized when she arrived at the hospital. Her mother fetched her. Though she said Ayaka took leave today, she would probably be well enough to go to school tomorrow.

“That’s fine.”

Alice’s sincerely happy expression made me feel shy for awhile.

It’s great that a tragedy like her needing to stay in the hospital again didn’t happen, but I still recalled Ayaka’s terrified expression that time.

At that moment, the screams that Ayaka made because of her memories.

I really wish that she would remember about me— but that wish started to waver. That’s because her memories about me would be entangled with the drug. If she’s in such pain, is it better if she doesn’t get her memory back?

Facing the silent me, Alice said in a businesslike tone:

“Yondaime called me just now, saying that though he hasn’t found the other three dropouts, he contacted some of the members of the Gardening Committee. It seems that Yondaime asked those people to look for him, so you’d better go and get some information as well.”

“…… Right now?”

“That’s right. Yondaime is different from you, he likes to finish things fast.”

“But I still have to help out at the ramen shop……”

Alice picked up the phone before I even finished talking.

“Ah, Master? It’s me. Didn’t Narumi quit the job at Hanamaru Ramen already? Yeah. So you mean that he’s just helping as a volunteer right now? I understand. Then of course his work as an assistant detective is given priority, right?”

The matter was dealt with in less than twenty seconds. So I’m just helping as a volunteer…… But she wasn’t wrong, since I’m now fired.

“Then…… Please go there immediately. They might already be there now.”

“…… Where’s the location?”

“A shrine.”

Shrine?

*

Though Japan is proclaimed as a country with no religion, there are actually lots of religious places in the city. Most of them are small shrines that most people don’t even know the names of.

Besides visiting there during the New Year or during rituals, almost nobody would think of these places. But sometimes it might also become an unforgettable place for a small amount of people.

And to me, the shrine gave me that kind of feeling that day.

The shrine was located at the borders of a neighboring district, and it took about ten minutes to ride over there from the ramen shop. Cheap and broken down apartments surrounded the woods nearby, and the forecourt of the shrine was located there; there was also a rather large cemetery that was surrounded by a cement wall beside the shrine.

A silver Civic car was parked on the road in front of the shrine. Yondaime didn’t bring his bodyguards here, perhaps taking the location into consideration. He wasn't wearing his crimson coat that day, so his whole attire was black; and there was a bottle of sake squeezed under his arm as well.

"Sorry for being late." I parked my bike at a side of the road that had some distance with the car.

"Those people have already arrived."

I looked at the forecourt of the shrine.

The temple that was surrounded by woodland was more majestic than I expected, and the stone path was rather clean as well. A small path leading to the cemetery was on our left, and we saw the silhouette of a columbarium after we passed the woods.

Three young men had gathered in front of a small tombstone earlier than us, and they were about the same age as Yondaime. One of them was wearing a suit, another was wearing casual attire of a Polo shirt and khaki trousers, while the last one was wearing the uniform of a construction site. When we approached, the three bowed to Yondaime at the same time.

"Sorry for calling you here suddenly."

Yondaime said in a completely unembarrassed tone, opened the bottle of sake and poured it on the tombstone. The sake that flowed down gradually dyed the word 'Minagawa' on the tombstone black.

The man in the casual attire answered: "It's okay, I was free anyways."

"I was visiting a client, so I could get here sneakily. Of course we must come when Sou-san is looking for us."

After the man in the suit finished saying that, he immediately poked the construction worker by his side: "While it's unusual for you to be able to come."

"I don't have any breaks at all, and I did not even know Minagawa was dead. I actually squeezed in some time to get out, but thank you for contacting me."

“You don’t need to thank me.” Yondaime answered expressionlessly, placing his palms together vertically in front of Minagawa’s tombstone. I hurriedly stabbed the incense that I bought just now into the ground, closing my palms as well.

The victim in the ‘Angel Fix’ incident might be the founder of the Gardening Club as well— Minagawa Kengo.

“I never would have thought that he would touch drugs.”

“He even looked rather unconcerned when he dropped out.”

“Do you remember? His parents divorced long ago, and his pop is rather……”

The three who once used the Gardening Committee as a secret base discussed in a pained tone behind me. It seemed that they had never met Yondaime, but heard about him before, and that’s why we managed to call them out like this. The fact that Yondaime created a chance for them to pray to Minagawa like this shows that a rather attentive mind was hidden behind his stern appearance.

“Then today is for……?”

The man in a suit sized me up while asking.

“You’re our kouhai? I heard you have something to ask us?”

“Ah, y- yes!”

“It’s better to speak over there.” Because of Yondaime’s suggestion, we returned to the woods, sitting on the wooden steps in front of the temple.

“Eh? Isn’t that……?”

The construction worker who was sitting above me suddenly noticed the clothes peg on my pocket and pointed while saying:

“Doesn’t that belong to Sayuri-chan?”

“…… Do you know Sayuri-sensei as well?”

“What do you mean do we know her? We once went to her lessons in the greenhouse.”

“It’s so nostalgic. She probably used this to make sure you don’t forget about your homework, right? It’s so embarrassing.”

“Is it possible…… that she gave you guys supplementary lessons before this as well?”

I nodded in surprise, recalling Sayuri-sensei’s words. That’s right. Some delinquents gathered at the Gardening Committee— she once said that she hanged out together with those people for some time, and started to give them supplementary lessons after class for some reason.

“Heh. That does indicate that you’re really our kouhai in some way!” The three laughed while saying.

People are connected to each other in intriguing ways sometimes.

“I often skipped classes to smoke behind the greenhouse, and I was caught by Sayuri-chan one day.”

“She wasn’t scary at all though she was angry, and she had just joined the school recently at that time.”

“Why did she start the supplementary lessons? That’s quite puzzling.”

The expression of the three while they were chatting looked comfortable like someone bathing in the warm sunlight during winter.

“But it’s all thanks to those supplementary lessons that I could graduate.”

“I can’t believe until now that you actually got into college.”

“I retook the exam a year. I also can’t believe that you actually found a job.”

“It would be better if Kanegawa didn’t drop out half way.”

"Eh? Did he take the lessons in the greenhouse as well?" I couldn't help but interject.

"That's right. As I recall, there were about ten people there."

"Sayuri-chan worked hard to move the blackboard in as well."

"But since the incident happened, we couldn't continue."

"Is it…… the death incident of Hayano Tomohiko?"

"Ah, so you know about it. That's right, you wanted to ask about this?"

It was as though the surrounding air suddenly chilled down. The man in a suit answered in a low voice:

"Tomohiko was in the supplementary classes as well. It was because he wasn't that healthy and kept taking leave. Though it snowed on the day that he died, I think he still did go to the lessons."

"But I really didn't notice that he was bullied by anyone."

"Then, Tetsu-senpai…… Did Ichinomiya-senpai have lessons in the greenhouse as well?"

"Oh yes. The ones who dropped out were all from the greenhouse group, all Sayuri-chan's students."

"Though only Tomohiko's personality was different form the others, it wasn't until the extent that people would bully him……"

"Does speaking of this now have any use?"

To hide the trembling of my fingers, I clenched my hands, fixing my gaze on the ground with my lips tightly closed. Yondaime who was sitting beside me didn't say anything at all, and his expression didn't change at all.

There were once lessons in Sayuri-sensei's 'classroom full of flowers'.

And it was destroyed from the inside by Tetsu-senpai and the others in the end…… Did Tetsu-senpai really do such a thing?

I still think that there's something off. That's right, Hirabayashi-sensei who was the advisor at that time and the people who gathered in the greenhouse didn't know of the mistreatment at all. How is this possible?

"It's great that we didn't become NEETs already."

"That's right. I think I'll visit Sayuri-chan with a present during Obon."

"To be frank, I'm quite embarrassed to go to M High now, but I really feel like seeing Sayuri-chan."

"I wonder if she didn't marry until now because of us."

The three laughed in a lonely way.

The three of them refused Yondaime's suggestion to drive them back, but that's quite normal. They would feel nervous, and though they were asked out, they probably didn't want to owe Yondaime any favors.

"Do you want to go back to Alice's now? Isn't Tetsu at the ramen shop as well?"

After sending them away, Yondaime asked me at the entrance of the shrine.

"Well…… Is there something wrong?"

"You're my brother after all, so if there's a need……"

Yondaime leaned on the car with his elbow on the top of the car, showing the expression of a hungry wolf in an instant.

"I can help you to beat him up."

Shocked, I hastily shook my head in response.

“T- there’s no need. I can’t ask other people to do such a thing.”

“Then are you preparing to do it yourself?”

Why do you keep coming to these conclusions?

“I can’t possibly do such a thing, and I don’t want to owe you any more favors.”

“If it’s just beating up that guy, it’s no big deal actually.”

To be honest, is Tetsu-senpai or this guy the stronger one? Though it’s unrelated to this, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat curious about this. Yondaime probably has an advantage in speed, but Tetsu-senpai would probably have an advantage in strength and stamina…… I think it’s safer for me to put this meaningless curiosity aside.

“You did me a big favor for today already.”

“This is not a favor, I’ll claim my payment from Alice.”

Ah, I see. As expected of the fourth generation of a businessman family, having such principles. However, would the fee be counted into my request fee in the end?

After Yondaime drove his car away, I pushed my bike onto the slope while thinking of Tetsu-senpai’s matter.

I’m sure that he’s hiding something. He doesn’t want to say anything though he’s one of the people involved, so that troubles me. The reason for beating him up is quite good, so it’s quite enough.

Though it’s rather odd, beating him up for something like this, but should I be more determined to pester him until he gives in? Alice yielded the very moment when Tetsu-senpai refused, why is that?

I suddenly recalled my conversation with Hiro-san.

‘Though we might lose a client because of this, it’s much better than losing a companion.’

So I chose not to touch Tetsu-senpai’s past again.

Alice might have the same sentiments as well. Not asking for Tetsu-senpai’s help might make us lose the power of the detective squad, we wouldn’t need to lose a companion because of this.

But I still find something odd. Is this kind of thought really better for all of us?

If we’re true companions—

Should we give him a vicious punch instead?

Perhaps this was Yondaime’s true intentions? ‘If I were you, I’d definitely beat him up.’ Something like that.

Unknowingly, I clenched my fists.

*

The next day, I had an opportunity to interact with Sayuri-sensei alone in the greenhouse.

“What is it, Fujishima-kun? You look like you’re spacing out, or is there something on my face?”

After she said that, I hastily turned my attention back to the textbook on the table.

“You really can’t concentrate when Shinozaki-san isn’t here, can you?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Two days passed since Ayaka fainted in Alice’s room, but she continued to take leave, and nobody picked up the phone; her mother did say that she probably could come to school. Though I was worried of Ayaka, I was actually thinking of the information about Sayuri-sensei in my bag.

After I reported to Alice about the things that I heard at the shrine, she immediately investigated Sayuri-sensei's background in detail, then handed the information to me; and I finally found out that sensei's surname was Kuroda. As for the other contents, I really didn't feel like reading it in detail. She's a teacher that I meet everyday at school! I would feel embarrassed if I know too much about her.

Even so, I still couldn't resist checking if she was unmarried. I'm really too curious for my own good.

"She probably knows about the situation that day as well, so you'd better question her about it."

Alice said in a nonchalant tone.

While sneakily observing sensei's expression, I pretended to concentrate on taking notes, but the things that I read actually didn't get absorbed into my mind as well.

"There's a staff meeting later, so I need to go first. You can revise what I taught before this first, I'll come back later."

After saying that, Sayuri-sensei stood up and was about to walk past the racks and tables full of flowers, out of the greenhouse. Ahh, it's my last chance. I pulled away the chair and stood up as well, running frantically out of the greenhose.

"Fujishima-kun, what is it?"

Sensei walked while looking back to ask me.

Err…… Where should I start from? Though time was short, I couldn't just start questioning her out of the blue, right? And if she found out that I was investigating the death incident, it would be hard to explain things.

"Well…… I heard that sensei did such a thing before this, right? Supplementary lessons after class."

“That’s right, there were even more people before this……”

Sensei’s expression at that moment looked rather sad, perhaps she recalled her dead student?

“Err…… I wore the clothes peg that you use to remind me of my homework when I went for my part time work yesterday, and I coincidentally met some senpais who graduated.”

I finally thought of a lie. Sensei looked rather curious about that.

“They said that they recalled you as soon as they saw the note, so it seemed that they went for your classes as well.”

“Is that so…… Who are they?”

“Well……” I spoke out their names as I recalled them.

“Uwaa, that’s so nostalgic! Are they alright these days?”

“Yeah. One of them was in college, while another started working now.”

“Is that so? Ah……”

When we reached a school building, a joyful smile that looked as though she was dreaming appeared on Sayuri-sensei’s face while she was walking up the stairs.

“Doing this is actually right…… Though I really regretted it when that happened.”

Sensei seemed to be mumbling to herself.

That happened……. The incident that made her regret teaching in the ‘classroom full of flowers’, That was probably—

“I heard from the senpais about the reason why the greenhouse lessons had to be canceled.”

Sensei suddenly stopped while she was climbing the stairs, while I hurriedly stopped in front of her and turned back.

“Ah…… Mnn, that’s sure to happen, talking about things like this. It really…….”

Sensei covered her mouth with her hands, her face turning pale. I just felt as though my gut was in pain as though a block of ice was stuffed into it. Do I have to continue to ask? To send messages for the dead, but hurt the ones who are still living?

But I have to do this.

“The person called Hayano…… Did he go to the supplementary lessons that day as well?”

Sensei stared at my face for awhile and nodded.

“But why are you asking about this?” Sensei said weakly.

“N- no…… Well, it’s just that……” I answered with the lie that I cooked up after a night’s though: “Since senpai were discussing about the last person Hayano-senpai talked to, so that made me rather curious……”

“Eh, ah……”

Sensei’s expression turned even more clouded. Though I felt like telling her ‘It’s okay, please forget all about this!’ and run down the stairs, away from there, I refrained myself from doing so and waited for an answer.

“…… Mnn, yeah. That’s right, only Hayano-kun was there that day, and since it was about time for the staff meeting, I asked him to do revision and I went back to the school building…... I was tidying up my desk after the meeting ended when I heard the sounds of the ambulance, and in the end……”

Sensei’s voice sounded like the moans of a patient that time. I really couldn’t bear to continue listening.

“…… So- sorry! I shouldn’t ask these strange questions……”

“I had no idea that Hayano-kun was bullied. I…… I saw that he was quite friendly with Ichinomiya-kun and the other, but- but……”

“Sensei, please stop! Sorry!”

“I planned to resign after that incident. The principal found out about it and gave me a huge scolding…… He said that giving these kids lessons was just a waste of time, and I used the school facilities without permission as well. Because of me—“

That wasn’t your fault, so please don’t say things like this.

Sayuri-sensei kept trembling while leaning on the walls of the stairs. I couldn’t help out regarding this matter, so I could only stand there and stare blankly at sensei’s face that was pale like a morning moon.

Was Tetsu-senpai the one who destroyed Sayuri-sensei’s class? Is that really true?

I really don’t know, and don’t dare to believe it. So I must confirm the truth.

With my own— fists.

*

I decided to ask him out to the park beside the railways where vagrants usually stay. I originally thought that asking him out to Hanamaru Ramen might be okay as well, but when I thought of the fact that I might need to do a lot of explanations if I was noticed by Alice through the surveillance machines; and the things that we were going to talk about was dumb contents that I’d rather Min-san didn’t hear.

The southern side of the small park had a five-person team soccer field surrounded with a green wire fence, Tetsu-senpai was waiting there while leaning against the goalpost. That was a cloudy afternoon, there weren’t anyone there, and the tents that I’m not sure if anyone inhabited them were unusually quiet as well. The whole park seemed to have been infected with a virus, a piteous atmosphere drifting in the air.

“…… What is it? Calling me out to this kind of place.”

Tetsu-senpai glared at me while kicking around a soccer ball left there. I really wished that someone would accompany me there, but I felt that it’s better if I go alone as well. My feelings were rather complicated, and I couldn’t talk for awhile.

In the end, I swallowed my mixed-up feelings, and said:

“…… I heard it from Sayuri-sensei and the others.”

Tetsu-senpai shrugged, as though he was saying ‘so what?’.

“Did you really bully the guy called Hayano together with the others?”

“Didn’t I tell you already? You’re so fussy.”

“I want an accurate answer.”

“I often asked him to be my errand boy. Though I didn’t really take off his shirt or anything, who knew he would freeze to death.”

I felt a stab of pain, as though a freezing spearhead was pierced into my armpit. I really felt like covering my mouth and my stomach with my hands, and nearly squatted down, too weak to continue.

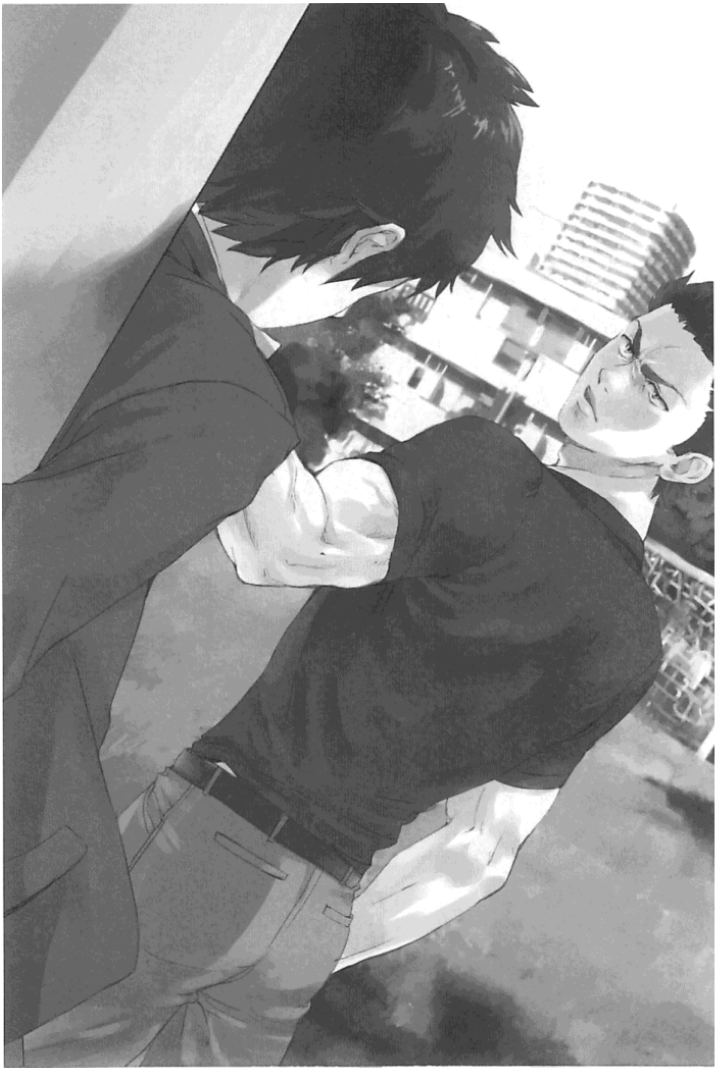
“…… Is that…… true? Please tell me the truth!”

“I’m telling you that it’s true.”

Lies! You…… You obviously aren’t that kind of person!

“Sayuri-sensei said that as well, Hayano was quite friendly with the others. How woul—“

As I approached Tetsu-senpai, he suddenly grabbed my collar, pushing me viciously onto the goalpost; hot air was squeezed out of my mouth. After some time, my body started to feel bouts of pain.



"Didn't I tell you before this? I'll beat you up if you continue to investigate!"

I saw vicious flames of fury in Tetsu-senpai's eyes, but I did not avert my gaze.

"Then— try it!"

Yondaime said so as well, just do it if you can. Do it! Senpai clenched his fists so hard that the sounds of his joints cracking could be heard. If it were Yondaime, he would've done it ages ago. Though I wasn't as strong as him, I was still his sworn brother after all— the bond that was formed with the sake that was thicker than blood.

"I'm okay even if you want to have a fight." I forcibly squeezed out a voice from my throat that was tightly throttled. "I drank the sake in Hirasaka-gumi after all, of course I have the resolution to deal with things with a fight!"

That's right, the judgment of Hirasaka-gumi is God's Judgment (It's just a normal fight). As long as you're in the right, God will allow him to win. But that's probably just a meaningless belief…… It's impossible that there would be such a thing. God wouldn't be that free that He'll meddle in kids' fights, and I'm not a person in that world with a clear borderline as well, but still—

There are some times when I have to do it!

"If senpai isn't lying, you'll win. I think— I won't lose to you!"

That's because I believe in senpai. He's definitely not a person that would mistreat other people, causing them to die!

Definitely— he's definitely hiding something, and that's why he lied. Even if that's only an empty truth that would hurt the living and shame the dead……

I must expose it!

"If you win, I'll stop investigating this. But if—“

Senpai narrowed his eyes

"If?"

If I win? Would this really happen?

But I must still do that. I must expose his lies, proving senpai's innocence.

Also, the Gardening Club would be abolished after two weeks. If only senpai would speak the truth…… If only we could find the true reason for the Gardening Club's existence……

"If I win…… Please tell me the whole truth."

"What do you mean by truth, I've said all I knew at the police station."

"Then why?" I straightened my back and left the goalpost, pushing away senpai's hand. "Why did Minagawa Kengo forcibly open the Gardening Club? You must know the reason, right? Because you're companions who were in the greenhouse together!"

"I don't know." Senpai looked rather awkward. Lies! Those were lies! He must know something!

"Are— are you really unable to tell me that? Why? Why are you lying? Sayuri-sensei, the advisor and the previous members of the Gardening Committee all said that they didn't know senpai once mistreated other people, right until the incident happened. How could that be!? Senpai is—"

I heard the sounds of senpai gritting his teeth, and even thought that he would bite me to death……. But then he finally said:

"…… So what does that mean?"

"If you don't want people to know, then just defeat me in a fight!"

"Fighting these meaningless fig—"

"If you can't tell me……" I continued hurriedly: "To Alice…… At least tell it to Alice. She probably knows all about it now. So please just answer one question from Alice frankly, that's all!"

"Do you really think you can defeat me?"

Of course I never thought of that, but I still continued:

"Even if I can't now, just give me two weeks—"

I suddenly felt that the world in front of me spun rapidly, and then a piercing light shone into my eyes, the taste of mud and iron filling my mouth. I only realized after quite some time that Tetsu-senpai hit me, causing myself to be sprawled on the ground.

"…… I got it, Narumi."

Senpai answered me with a hoarse voice. My ears and my eyes felt bouts of pain.

"When you're ready, challenge me anytime. I'll kill you……"

*

Min-san handled my would in the kitchen of the ramen shop.

"You're pretty badly beaten up, even having bruises."

Quite a few plasters were stuck onto my neck. I didn't really notice it since I was too agitated, but they say that both my lips and the back part of my neck were bleeding.

"W- well……" I didn't know how to answer. "I just fell down from my bike."

"Oh please, do you really think that I can't tell these are bruises from a fight?"

Uwaa! So she could tell just by one look?

"Don't tell a lie if you can't, remember that."

"Uuuu….."

Only the two of us were in the shop, so it's hard to escape from her questions.

"How could you win when you're against Tetsu? Are you an idiot?"

"No, I just got assaulted this time." Why does she even know who hit me? She would probably beat me up immediately if I tell her that I'm going to have another fight with Tetsu-senpai.

“Isn’t your only virtue your mouth that’s unusually good at bluffing? What are you fighting for?”

“So Min-san thinks that as well……”

She was spot on. But you don’t need to keep emphasizing that it’s my ‘only virtue’, do you? At least say that it’s one of my ‘less virtues’?

“But don’t you think that sometimes you just have to do it?”

“Absolutely not.”

She refuted me immediately. That’s so depressing.

“You only think that there’s a necessity because you’re just a dumb kid. What are you so impatient for? You seem to be like this recently.”

I’m impatient— really?

With my hand on my lips that were still aching faintly, I thought. It might be so. When did it start? Probably from the time when Ayaka came back? It just feels as though I was mystifyingly running around here and there, doing a lot of meaningless things. Yondaime seemed to have said that as well. Wait, wasn’t the one who told me to beat Tetsu-senpai up Yondaime in the first place? Wait a minute, why am I listening to him so obediently? And did Yondaime really mean that?

My wounds were slightly hot, and that made my consciousness fade slightly, so I lowered my head again.

“I feel— that would make me feel better. Beating him up or getting beaten up by him.”

“That’s completely meaningless. If you have the time to do such dumb things, it’s better if you use the time to keep Ayaka company.”

That might be the case, but……

“I’m really confused right now. To senpai, and to Ayaka as well……”

“Tetsu’s problem is Tetsu’s, Ayaka’s problem is Ayaka’s, aren’t they just different?”

“Senpai…… It might be so. But Ayaka…… I kept her company at school, but she just calls me ‘Fujishima-san’, always speaking politely in front of me or squeezing out a smile. It’s just too……”

“Did you speak of this to Ayaka?”

“How could I say that to her!”

“Why?”

“Because it’s already hard on Ayaka to take care of herself, how can I be so selfish?”

“Why are you NEETs always meddling in other people’s business, not worrying about yourselves?”

I stared blankly at Min-san. I didn’t even have the energy to rebuke her ‘I’m not a NEET’. Min-san smiled while washing her frying pan.

“You really don’t have any progress. Why don’t you just act as you usually do? Ayaka is the same here as well. Seriously…… Looking at your actions, it made my shoulders ache as well.

“Act as I usually do…… The problem is Ayaka doesn’t know how to deal with me.”

“Why?”

“Because, Ayaka doesn’t say anything to me—“

Ah!

I slapped my thigh forcefully.

So that’s why. Ayaka didn’t know what to do because I didn’t say anything to her.

If that was so, both of us— really didn't have any progress at all, staying at the same place. Even so…… Because of that……

Start from the beginning…… Could we start over from the time when we haven't grown? Starting from the October that we haven't known each other yet. Ayaka was the only one observing me at that time, even though it was like that in the beginning, we still became friends after some difficulties.

It's just that I'm the only one knowing Ayaka right now instead. If so, isn't it the same as that time?

If so, is there a way to start over without having a need for her to regain her memories? Using the same way……

I felt rather embarrassed to raise my head. It felt as though the sound of Min-san cutting the onions was like her laughing at me. No, she might really be laughing at me.

Just at that moment, the door of the ramen shop was opened.

Raising my head, I saw a silhouette wearing a sailor's uniform behind the portiere. Pinning a side of her hair up with a pin, the slightly coffee colored fringe, the friendly eyes blinked repeatedly below her determined brows. After that, she suddenly blushed, going backwards rapidly, planning to close the door again.

I wanted to stand up, but Min-san who was beside me suddenly waved, throwing something with a lightning speed. A clumped up black object hit Ayaka's face.

"Uwaa!" Ayaka made an odd noise, then kept flailing her hands, frantically trying to pat away the black apron covering her face.

"Are you trying to go back right now? We're preparing to open the shop right now, wash your hands!"

"Erm…… Well…… Fujishima-san is here."

With an apologetic look, Ayaka bent her back while walking into the shop.

“I’m telling you that this guy was fired.”

What a cruel way of putting it.

When I passed by Ayaka at a counter, she suddenly saw my wounds.

“Hurt!? H- how are you? A- are you okay!?”

“Eh? Mnn, it’s nothing much. I’m alright, Ayaka…… Are you okay?”

“Eh? Erm…… Sorry for not picking up your calls.”

I shook my head weakly. It’s okay as long as she is still willing to come to Hanamaru Ramen.

“…… You, why are you wearing a uniform?” She didn’t even go to school today.

“W- well……” Though there was obviously not much dust on the skirt, Ayaka kept patting it. “A lot of flowers are going to bloom soon, so I went back to take care of them. Though I didn’t go to classes, I thought that I should at least attend Sayuri-sensei’s supplementary lessons.”

Ah, I see. After I ran away without doing revision, Ayaka went there. Because of that, Sayuri-sensei probably wouldn’t get so depressed.

I stood at the seams between the counter in the kitchen and the customer seats, blankly looking at Ayaka putting on her apron with unaccustomed movements.

I originally thought she would come back— wouldn’t come back to Hanamaru Ramen and the greenhouse……

“W- what is it?”

Ayaka raised the side of the apron to cover half of her face, asking in a rather embarrassed tone.

“Nothing!” I shook my head while denying, and suddenly felt pain on my neck. “Ouuchhh…..”

“Fujishima-san, are you really okay? Why is your wound—“

“It’s just from a fight with kids, just let them fight. Letting Tetsu and Narumi fight might cure them of their idiot illness.”

“With Tetsu-san? Y- you really fought? Why?”

Why…… Hearing Ayaka ask the same question again, I really didn’t know how to answer. I think all of this was done for Ayaka and myself, though I couldn’t really tell how they’re connected—

Though I’m not sure how they’re connected, I could only answer frankly:

“Sorry, I’m a bit muddled up right now, so I’m not sure why— but if Tetsu-senpai doesn’t tell me the truth, the Gardening Club might just be abolished. So……”

To protect the place that belongs to Ayaka and I.

“I…… Is it because of me? Because I can’t remember the past, so you’re so stubborn about the Gardening Club because you want to keep things the same way as it wa—“

No. It’s not that. Though I thought that in my heart, I found that I couldn’t say it out loud.

I clenched the armband that I kept in my pockets that I didn’t hand it to Ayaka for a long time.

I did think of that before. But now that Ayaka said it out directly, it just made me feel that my reason for protecting the Gardening Club is not only to get her memories back.

Then why am I so determined to protect the Gardening Club?

“I’ll do my best!” Ayaka made a sound that was close to pleading. “I would definitely do my best to remember! I’ll help out at the ramen shop as well, and wouldn’t take leave again! So please don’t do such dangerous things! It’s okay even if the Gardening Club is not here, if only you—“

I felt like there was an impact on my face by a large steel ball. She would do her best? Ayaka said that she would do her best?

Why? Why is she saying that? I actually don’t wish for her to say these things. So she was thinking of such grievous things beside me all along……?

“I didn’t do that just for that……. I don’t know how to say it. Ayaka, you don’t need to…… And I’ve decided already, so……”

“Fujishima-san!”

“Ayaka, forget it. It’s useless.”

Min-san looked at the pot while saying:

“He didn’t do it just because of you. Men are a type of creature like that, an idiot when they’re born, an idiot when they’re born, and an idiot when they’re dead as well. Don’t bother about him.”

I looked at Min-san who was icily looking at me from the corner of her eyes, and looked at Ayaka who was in tears. As I was about to open the door, the door of the ramen shop was forcefully opened.

“Aniki! Is it true that you and Tetsu-ojiki are going to have a fight!?”

A crowd of tall men wearing black T-shirts squeezed into the ramen shop, almost crushing the door— so they’re Pole, Rock and other men from Hirasaka-gumi, about six or seven of them. I just felt that the color in my face instantly drained out.

“E- erm…… Why do you know about this!?”

“Tetsu-ojiki called Sou-san just now, asking him to be the witness.”

What’s with this person? Rushing forwards without caring about anything!

“We could finally see aniki’s true powers!” “If he ties in Tetsu-ojiki, he’ll be able to fill in the vacancy in the Four Heavenly Kings for Hirasaka-san!” “We’ll be invincible then!”

“See, they’re all idiots.” Min-san said to Ayaka beside her. But Ayaka’s eyes were full of tears, and she shook her head helplessly.

“Oi, you kids! Get out if you’re not ordering anything! Make trouble outside if you’re going to do that!”

Min-san shouted while banging her pot with a spoon. The young yakuzas stood up straight, then politely sat on the seats together. Evidently, the others could only be chased outside to sit on the beer crates.

“Then I’ll have a tonkatsu ramen.”

“Tonkatsu ramen!”

“I want tonkatsu ramen as well!”

Tonkatsu ramen was specially made by Min-san to wish us luck before this, but the taste wasn’t that good…… I just feel that I’m going to have a headache.

“It seems that the odds will increase drastically this time!” “Oi, who’s going to be the dealer?”

“Okay! I’m betting on Tetsu-ojiki, ten thousand!”

“I’m betting on Tetsu-ojiki as well, ten thousand!”

“Then I’ll bet on Tetsu-ojiki fifteen thousand!”

“I’m going all out! Twenty thousand on Tetsu-ojiki!”

“Using up the determination for entering a bear’s lair to bet twenty thousand on Tetsu-ojiki!”

“With the resolution to jump down from the stage of Shimizu Tower, I’m betting fifty thousand on Tetsu-ojiki!”

"Eh? Aniki, are you okay? You look rather pale. Please show us more vigor!"

It's all your fault! Okay, I get it, I don't have any chance of winning!

"We can't bet like this."

"Then should we change it to how many minutes the fight will last?"

"Shouldn't we change it to how many seconds?"

"Or change it to how many meters will aniki will fly away to?"

"Or how many months will it take for aniki to heal?"

"Or how many rib bones of aniki will be broken?"

Please stop, my fighting spirit dropped to zero a long time ago already!

As I was seriously considering whether I should run away from the kitchen backdoor, I suddenly heard the door open, and a voice drifted in along with the chilly wind outside.

"— I'm betting as well. Five thousand on Vice Admiral Fujishima."

"Then I'm betting ten thousand on Narumi-kun as well. I'll be able to get two times more than Major, right?"

The members of the gang stared blankly at them with their mouths wide open. I think my expression might be the same as well.

Major had a large backpack on his back, and he pushed his goggles onto his forehead. Hiro-san who was by his side wore a tailored coat with tight-fitting jeans. The two of them stood in front of the entrance of the ramen shop. "…… Ojiki, are you serious?" Pole asked doubtfully.

"Of course I'm serious. Isn't it a fight between Narumi-kun and Tetsu?" Hiro said while winking at me.

“Gambling doesn’t only take in account winning or losing, we must observe the odds as well. However small the chances for Vice Admiral Fujishima to win—“

Major dropped his backpack onto the cement floor with a thud, then looked at the others.

“If the odds are eight times, I will bet on Vice Admiral Fujishima. Because—“

“Because we’ll provide support from now.”

…… Provide support?

Does that mean Major and Hiro-san would support me?

The members of Hirasaka-gumi sitting in a row on the seat exchanged gazes and started to whisper to each other, but still nobody had the courage to bet on the other side. Well, this is quite normal, Major and Hiro-san are the ones who are strange. Helping me? Why? What would they get from this? Why is that?

“Of course it’s to get money.”

Hiro-san showed a casual smile, and brought me out to the gathering spot outside the kitchen backdoor. Though there wasn’t much sunlight here, it was the small kingdom of NEETs that was full of warmth. Major sat on a beer crate while Hiro-san leaned against a large steel bucket.

“You guys…… Didn’t you guys say that you wouldn’t help Alice and I?”

“That is that, this is this.”

“I just said that I wouldn’t involve myself in Tetsu-san’s past.”

The two got even more enthusiastic, vigor filling their eyes. That was when I understood something.

They couldn’t just wait there silently without doing anything. Just because they’re Tetsu-senpai’s companions, they couldn’t get involved if senpai isn't willing, and cannot take part in the investigation. Even so……

"Narumi-kun, of course, we wouldn't force you if you say that you don't need it."

Hiro-san suddenly showed a rather lonely expression.

For money, and for themselves. The rough NEETs in this city are so useless that they must use such a forced excuse to hide their own kindness— even so, even if it's only for this reason…… As a response for their kindness, it has value even if I were to be beaten up by Tetsu-senpai.

"Tetsu and I hung out together for a long time, and I saw quite some fights as well. I can tell you his habits when he's fighting or the blind spots of his attacks!"

"Vice Admiral Fujishima, I can let you test the fighting stimulator that I modified from a Wii."

The silhouettes of the two came into my view, but I felt my vision blurring. The hot tears almost gushed out, so I hurriedly lowered my head.

"…… Narumi-kun? You're really……"

"I- it's okay, nothing's wrong. I'm okay."

I bit my lips, trying hard not to let my voice tremble.

"Got it."

The heat on my face passed through my throat along with the pain on my body. I silently waited for the heat flow to fade, and raised my head after staring at my open palms:

"— please help me."

The two stood up at the same time.

"Min-san, I want a tonkatsu ramen as well!"

“I want a large tonkatsu ramen as well!”

Major and Hiro-san poked their heads into the shop to order. I repeatedly opened and clenched my fists, confirming the head lingering in my wet palm.

At that moment, the prelude of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ rang in my pocket.

‘What were you doing just now? A bunch of people from Hirasaka-gumi are gathered below as well, why aren’t you here to report to me?’

“…… Okay, I’ll be over there right away.”

“A fight with Tetsu?”

After Alice who was sitting on the bed finished saying, her jaw dropped. It’s quite an accomplishment for her not to drop her Dr. Pepper in her hands onto the floor.

It was quite an expected response. After I collected the dirty clothes scattered all over the floor and threw them into the washing machine outside, Alice started to grumble:

“I really cannot understand the mental structure of your mind. Compared with your brain, ‘Finnegans Wake’ is easier to understand. Deciding the results with a fight with Tetsu? If your aim is to increase your intelligence by letting your skull withstand a large impact, it would be better if I just introduce you to a person who specializes in removing buildings.”

“Well…… Erm……” Since I knew that I couldn’t explain, it was even harder for me to say anything. “Did you read the translated version of ‘Finnegans Wake’?”

“Of course it’s the original one! And don’t change the topic!”

Alice hit her blankets repeatedly in annoyance. Why does it seem that it’s easier for her to get angry these days? What’s wrong?

“Listen, in your knowledge, Tetsu is probably just a good-for-nothing gambler who wastes his life on pachinko and horse races……” Is that wrong? “Look at this so your mind will be clearer. Change your opinion of him!”

Alice pointed at the right side of the bed with her fingers, the monitor that was placed crookedly on a rack nearest to me, then typed speedily on the keyboard with one hand while saying.

After some time, rough black and white footage was played on the screen. I realized that it was a rather old recording, because the kitchen backdoor was not too similar to what it looks like now. The wooden stands that were used as a table were not present, while the large steel buckets haven’t rusted yet, and were glittering. The only thing that was the same was the silhouette of a man. His muscular back could be seen even through a T-shirt, and his powerful, toned arms that were like cable car wires. Tetsu-senpai.

The more surprising thing was, the ones opposite him were Pole and Rocky. Though only the chest of the T-shirt of Hirasaka-gumi could be seen, there probably weren’t any other lackeys that were fitter than them.

Since there were no sounds in the footage, their next movements couldn’t be predicted at all. It looked like Pole lashed out first, while Tetsu-senpai’s strong body was light as a falling leaf, evading his attack in millimeters, then punching the abdomen of the black shirt. The vibrations from the punch seemed to float out of the screen, Pole who didn’t fall even though he was punched really should be applauded. At that moment, senpai noticed Rocky going to his back carefully, so he sprang back a few steps.

Up till now, I still thought that Yondaime should have the advantage in speed, while senpai should be more accustomed to brawls, attacking with his raw power and stamina. But that was completely wrong. Against the two bodyguards of Hirasaka-gumi, senpai didn’t even give them the chance of getting near, viciously hitting the opposing party from outside the attacking area of the enemy as though he was using magic, and even making people feel as though his attacks are a kind of art.

So— he was a boxer.

“— that’s right, this is a boxer.”

After Alice finished saying that, the footage vanished.

“Though this was footage from three years ago, you shouldn’t expect his skills to be rusty. You should know that Tetsu still keeps his boxing equipment, right?”

That’s right. When I suddenly asked him to teach me boxing, Tetsu-senpai immediately prepared boxing gloves, bandages and a sandbag.

That means, senpai is still a boxer right now.

“He’s what we call a boxing fighter, having both speed and destruction, an all-rounder that could deal with any enemy. If they fought on a ring, Yondaime would probably lose to him as well. As for you……”

“I understand that.”

“You don’t understand! The fist of a boxer is a killing weapon, it can kill, understand!?”

“Erm…… Well—“ I stared at Alice whose brows arched in anger. “Are you worried about me?”

“W- who…… who’s worried about you!” Alice’s face was flushed, her hair even stood up as though it went through an electric current. “Who’ll be worried about your things!”

In the end, she just threw items by her side at me just like the last time she got angry. Pillows, remotes, empty cans, printers, and so on— Oi, oi! Don’t throw the printer!

“Why must I worry about you!”

Alice’s angry roars caused the wall of dolls to collapse, scattering all over the floor with dull thuds. Also because she was frantically waving her pillows, hitting her bed, an avalanche of dolls happened once more.

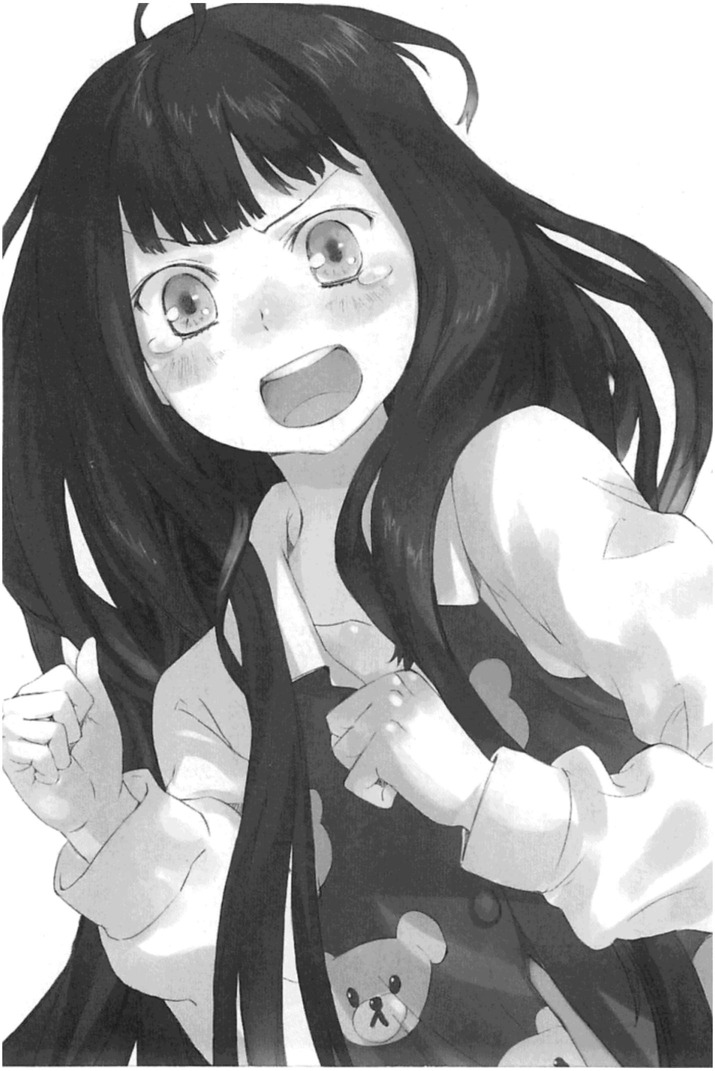
“I just couldn’t forgive your dumb actions! As for how low your intelligence is, it’s so despairing that even touching the Monolith[1] for seventy thousand times couldn’t raise your intelligence to the level of monkeys!”

Being shouted at like that, it made me feel rather embarrassed as well. After I picked up the dolls scattered on the floor and placed them back on the bed, Alice scattered them again with a swing from her pillow. I don’t have any choice but to kneel on the bed.

“Some people say that ‘Idiots would stop being idiots after they died once’, if you want to prove this saying that only idiots would believe in, then please—“ I caught hold of Alice’s wrists so that she would calm down.

“W- what are you doing? Let go of me!”

In front of me was a NEET detective with a flushed face, tears swirling in her eyes.



“Erm…… Sorry for always acting like an idiot.”

“I- if you have the time to apologize, then don’t keep doing dangerous but meaningless things every time!”

“I know that I keep worrying you, but that’s all that I can do.”

“I’m not worried!”

Alice’s hands were tightly held by me, but she still used her head to repeatedly ram into my chest. I thought blankly, would Tetsu-senpai's fist be a thousand times as painful as this……?

"You're my assistant, and the more terrible thing is that I only have one assistant, and don't even have a replacement! But you just like to act tough every time!"

Alice leaned her cheek on my chest, raising her head to say to me tearfully. Heat seeped into my clothes.

"Mnn."

My answer was somewhat like a sigh. And then, I let go of Alice's hands, lightly patting her hair.

Thinking alone wouldn't help things, but I'm not alone anymore. So I tried to change the thoughts in my mind into words:

"Doing this might be stupid, but I really can't differentiate things clearly. I actually felt quite sad when senpai said that he wouldn't tell us anything about him. So it's impossible for me to hang out with him as usual at a place unrelated to the incident. I'm not that mature yet."

But I didn't mention the matter about Yondaime asking me to do it. Because it isn't the reason anymore, I decided to do so myself.

"Of course, I know what Major and Hiro-san meant, but…… Sometimes, because we're companions, we shouldn't pretend that nothing happened; get angry when you're angry, isn't that right? That was why I asked Tetsu-senpai out, and it accidentally turned into this situation……"

"What do you mean accidentally? Is this a matter that can be simply brushed past?"

In the end, it turned into the situation when I have to prepare for battle— the main point is because I was rather scared of facing Tetsu-senpai, and senpai was just too kind.

"But actually I don't think it's wholly useless, not a meaninglessly dangerous action as well. Tetsu-senpai promised that he would answer your questions honestly if only I win.”

Actually he didn’t promise things, it’s just that I believe he would definitely answer.

A boxer probably wouldn’t lie because of the results of a fight with his own fists.

“Though I never thought that I would win from the start, but if I never tried, the chances would definitely be zero.”

“Just because of that!? There should be a more intelligent, detective-like solution!”

“Mnn…… Sorry.”

“……. Whatever, do as you like.”

Alice pushed me away with her head lowered, then turned over, ignoring my presence.

“Though I obviously have a lot of detective work piled up…. I really don’t have the energy to scold you anymore.”

As I was about to answer, the hurricane-like typing sounds rang again. I could only retract the hand that I extended towards Alice’s back.

That’s right. I’m an assistant detective, and the first party in the incident. But I did as I liked this time, it’s understandable that Alice is angry.

Can I still apologize to her when things end? Would she even forgive me?

Or—

Thinking about this wouldn’t help things at all. As I was about to leave the bedside and walk to the entrance—

“Where are you going? I didn’t say that you could go back!”

I turned my head over because of Alice's displeased voice.

"I'm burning a DVD right now, wait there."

DVD?

After a while, Alice took out a disc and placed it into a transparent plastic box, then handed it to me.

"This one is the recordings from the times when Tetsu was fighting. He often fought near the building before this, so there is still some footage about this. There is also footage of Master and Yondaime. Play it in slow motion and see if it helps. For some reason, only your eyesight is okay. And speaking of which, it only has meaning if you can dodge it even if you can see it— w- what's with your smiling expression!?"

"Eh? Ah, n- no, nothing!"

After looking at the DVD-R in my hands, I looked at Alice's face.

"And are you planning to go after you finished speaking of your meaningless things? I still have matters to explain to you! And there's a lot of things for you to investigate at the scene as well!"

"Ah…… T- that's right."

I frantically suppressed the urge of my mouth curling, and walked back to the bedside.

Alice explained to me the long-winded work contents while being angry, as usual.

1. ↑ An object that helped primates to evolve into intelligent beings in the movie '2001: A Space Odyssey

Chapter 4

Below the ginkgo tree that grew beside the walls extending from the school entrance— in the middle of the pathway that leads to the courtyard between the school buildings and the exterior walls, and also from the boundary between the tiled floor and the soil ground extending inwards from the plaza in front of the school entrance. I leaned against the wall of the school building, staring at the place where the roots swelled.

The sports clubs in the middle of their jogging passed by in front of my eyes with a rhythmic and loud noise while the long shadows of the ginkgo tree branches slowly extended to my feet along with the afternoon sunlight in May.

If it were to be a winter evening, this area would be shrouded in shadows because of the walls blocking the sunlight ages ago, turning into a chilly pathway. I unmindfully imagined Hayano Tomohiko collapsed in the thick layer of snow. Though it was winter, the sleeves of his shirt were unreasonably rolled up, and it was said that there were signs of vomited blood on his chest as well.

But no matter how I imagined, the silhouette in my mind who was collapsed on the snowy ground would turn into the Student Council president Hayano Kaoruko-senpai. When I think about this, I have completely no idea what Hayano Tomohiko-senpai looked like

As for Tetsu-senpai who was squatting beside the cold body of the victim, I could clearly imagine him, but he was wearing his usual short sleeved T-shirt. How is that possible? At that time, he should be obediently wearing his school uniform as well.

I stopped imagining the scene that I never saw before, and picked up my phone to take photos of the surroundings. I sent them to Alice immediately after I finished taking them, and then I walked to the courtyard.

A glass roof reflecting the dazzling sunlight could be clearly seen at the other side of the narrow, dark courtyard, and that is the greenhouse. The day that the incident happened, Hayano Tomohiko was doing self revision there. It is said that it was snowing heavily that day, so the surroundings of the greenhouse should be pitch black as well.

Even so, a crowd of boys went there— the delinquents who used the greenhouse as their secret base, the Gardening Committee members who took Sayuri-sensei's supplementary classes after class.

Tetsu-senpai— he was one of them as well.

With the excuse of coldness endurance training, they told Hayano Tomohiko to jog out and buy something in the falling snow, while they stayed warm in the greenhouse. Since a really long time passed, Tetsu-senpai went to the entrance of the school to have a look, and found Hayano Tomohiko collapsed at the roots of the ginkgo tree.

Hayano Tomohiko's cardiopulmonary functions were naturally weak, and he had primary pulmonary hypertension as well; His blood pressure rose rapidly because of the sudden cold, and his symptoms worsened, causing pulmonary hemorrhage, and he died that night in the district hospital.

After collecting all the information about the incident that day and piecing them together, that was the conclusion that Alice and I formed.

The guitar melody of 'Colorado Bulldog' rang in my pocket.

"Did you get the photos?"

'I received it, but there's something strange.' That was Alice's answer at the other side of the phone.

"What do you mean?"

'The location where the victim collapsed. It should be on the way to the greenhouse after passing the courtyard from the school entrance, but……'

"Is there anything strange about that?"

'Wasn't it so cold that it was snowing that day? Then why didn't he just enter the school building from the school entrance, isn't walking past the corridors to the entrance nearest to the greenhouse from the courtyard?'

I moved the phone away and checked out the school building.

That's right. There were two entrances to the courtyard, and the one inside is very close to the greenhouse. That means, one could reach the greenhouse while avoiding the snow outside as long as he enters the school building. However……

The image that drifted into my mind at that moment made me feel a chill on my back.

"…… The person that told him to be the gofer might be the one who told him to run back in the heavy snow."

I hoped for Alice to deny the suggestion, but she answered nonchalantly:

'That is certainly possible. The other point is the direction of him collapsed.'

Direction?

'From the testimonies of the witnesses who saw Hayano Tomohiko collapsed, there were a few more versions besides Tetsu's. Before the ambulance reached, actually quite a few students and teacher saw him. The advisor of your club— Kuroda Sayuri saw that as well. According to the testimonies, Tomohiko collapsed while facing the direction of the ginkgo tree, that statement is consistent.'

"…… Does that really matter?"

'Think carefully about it by yourself. Is empty space the only thing in the middle of your eyes and ears?'

I was rather unhappy because of her saying that, and closely observed the ginkgo tree again. Since his head is facing the tree, that means his legs were pointing towards the school building or the courtyard. And he's lying down—

Hmm?

"…… Does that mean he collapsed on the way outside and not after he finished buying the things?"

'That assumption can be established. Don't you feel that it's strange?'

"Why? Even if he didn't collapse when he's coming back— ah, no, sorry. I get it, I get it."

I realized the contradiction before Alice started to scold me, and hurriedly corrected myself:

"The timing doesn't match, right?"

'That is correct. Seriously, please develop the habit of sitting down and thinking carefully before saying you don't know.'

"Okay, I'm wrong……"

According to Tetsu-senpai's testimony, he went to the school entrance to look for Hayano Tomohiko because he came back too late. If that is true, that should happen some time after Hayano Tomohiko went out. Assuming Hayano Tomohiko collapsed before he exited the school, he should be in the heavy snow for quite some time.

Just like that, there's a suspicious contradiction. Why wasn't Hayano Tomohiko noticed by the other people before being found by Tetsu-senpai? Even if it's snowing heavily that day, the place that he was collapsed at was beside the school entrance, and it was just after school, when there are the most people going out.

"Is it possible that he collapsed when he came back? Maybe something happened that caused him to collapse in that direction."

'What would the something happened that you spoke of refers to?'

“I have no idea……”

‘The situation that you spoke of is largely possible, because it’s just the direction that he was collapsed. Even if it’s when he came back, there might be some reason that caused him to collapse facing the school entrance. In any case, the thing that we are certain of is that something happened there. A detective cannot miss these clues, and also cannot dismiss them and forget them.’

I grunted in agreement. We must remember them no matter how little they are.

’There’s another thing that I can’t confirm here. So I wish for you to question Kuroda Sayuri about this.’

”Mnn, what is it?”

And Alice gave me an odd question that I found hard to say.

”……Must I…… ask this?”

I think Sayuri-sensei probably doesn’t want to recall anything about Hayano Tomohiko anymore. But if I ask her this kind of question……

’If you know any other witnesses, feel free to ask them.’

That kind of person— only Tetsu-senpai is left. I get it now, there’s really no other alternative. And there’s not much time left.

Coincidentally, both sensei and Ayaka were in the greenhouse.

”Though you said that you’re going to save the Gardening Club, Fujishima-kun doesn’t join the club activities or supplementary lessons often……’

Ayaka looked rather downcast. It seemed that she was still rather concerned about our unfinished conversation because the guys from Hirasaka-gumi, Hiro-san and the others suddenly came and made trouble.

”It’s okay even if the Gardening Club disappears, I just hope you can come here everyday……”

It’s okay…… even if it disappears. My chest was painful after hearing Ayaka say that.

For who, and for what reason am I protecting the Gardening Club for? In the end I have to have a fight with Tetsu-senpai too. I suppressed the doubs in my heart and answered randomly:

”Err…… Sorry. It’s because I’m busy with my part time job.”

”But I heard that you were fired from your job at the ramen shop because of Shinozaki-san, wasn’t it?”

Sayuri-sensei picked at my wound with a smile, and told me to quickly take out a textbook and sit down. So you even talk about these things? When I’m not here……

”To be honest, if I compare Fujishima-kun with Shinozaki-san, isn’t it completely incomparable? Fujishima-kun isn’t serious, and doesn’t work, and isn’t considerate, and isn’t serious……” She actually said that I’m not serious twice!

”Erm…… Min-san probably saw Fujishima-san’s strong points, right?”

Ayaka hurriedly explained for me.

”Is that so……? For example?”

”W- well…… For example, you would help to taste the new products even if you’re already full, saying honestly that it’s bad even though you know you’re going to get beaten up, and you would take the initiative to try the taste even if Min-san didn’t ask you to.”

”Fujishima-kun, aren’t you an employee? Why did you just taste the products?” Sensei interjected.

”Of course it’s not just that!” If you’re helping me like that, it’s better if you don’t speak……

I weakly sat on the seat beside Ayaka, nearly forgetting the reason that I came here for.

”Actually, it’s my other job that I’m busy with.”

”Oh? So you actually have two part time jobs? It’s no wonder your grades were so bad. What’s your other job about?”

”Well……” I really feel lazy to explain……

”An assistant detective, right?” Ayaka added while looking at my face.

”Detective?”

Sayuri-sensei widened her eyes in surprise. I think this is a rather natural response.

”Wait a minute, it wouldn’t be dangerous work, would it? Like searching for missing people, catching adulterers in the act and the likes?”

”Ah, that’s not it……” I see, so the impression of most people on detectives is like that? “We don’t accept cases like that, and I’m really just doing odd jobs there.”

”It’s a dangerous job. He often gets hurt.”

Ayaka said grumpily, while I hastily interjected to prevent her from continuing:

”That means, the detective would investigate a lot of cases through the internet, but there are some cases when we must go to the scene to investigate, and those are what I’m usually doing.”

”For example, what case do you investigate?” Sayuri-sensei tilted her head in puzzlement.

There’s no other choice, since the topic is on this now…… I gulped and continued:

”Now…… we’re investigating the incident on that snowy day. The case about Hayano Tomohiko-senpai……”

Sayuri-sensei’s expression didn’t undergo drastic changes this time, it’s just that her expression was rather unnatural, and she bit her lips lightly.

”The detective told me to ask you something. Sensei, you probably saw Hayano Tomohiko at the scene, right? Before the ambulance came.”

When sensei nodded lightly in confirmation, I continued to inquire:

”Then please think back on the situation that time, was there any signs of bleeding at the spot where the victim was collapsed?”

I noticed a queasy expression on Ayaka’s face, while sensei’s expression was pale as snow.

”Well….. Mnn…… Probably not…… Because it was snowing heavily that time, so we would have noticed if there was blood on the ground. But why are you asking about that?”

Sensei’s answer sounded like she was mumbling to herself, while a chill came on my back because of her answer.

No signs of blood? Hayano Tomohiko should have vomited blood that time.

This might be a point that had been overlooked, because the snow that kept falling buried the signs of blood. That would mean Alice predicted that I would get this answer even before this. I finally understood what she wanted to express.

What— does this mean?

”Why are you investigating this? Quite a few passed now.”

Sensei looked like a withered flower when she was asking me that.

”…… I remember that I told you about the matter that the Gardening Club is going to be abolished, right?”

I glanced at sensei and Ayaka.

”The Gardening Club is actually a rather odd club, and was forcibly founded by a member of the Inspection called Minagawa Kengo in a short time. It’s obviously a small club, but its budget isn’t small, and it requires a large maintenance fee, and that’s why the Student Council is trying to solve this problem. But if there was a reasonable reason when it was founded……”

”Minagawa-kun? Does it refer to that Minagawa-kun?”

”Sensei taught them in supplementary classes before this, right?”

”That’s right…… But the supplementary lessons had to stop after that, while Minagawa-kun repeated the year and then left school…… Though I’m not sure what he’s doing right now, I still know how to contact him. Why don’t you just ask Minagawa-kun directly? Why are you doing so much to ask me about Hayano-kun?”

Just at that moment, I noticed that Ayaka’s condition started to be unstable. Whenever she hears the word Minagawa, her shoulders would tremble. But I must still tell sensei the truth……

”Minagawa-senpai…… He already passed away…… Because of the drug incident last winter.”

Sensei covered her mouth with both her hands.

”How can this be……”

”But I think there’s definitely a link between this— about the incident on the snowy day and the reason for the establishment of the Gardening Club. That’s why I must know about Hayano-senpai and Minagawa-senpai.”

And about Tetsu-senpai as well……

Even if I have to hurt the living to speak for the dead, I have to get this clear.

”Mina…… Gawa……”

A voice suddenly came from beside us, it was Ayaka. She stared at thin air, her half-open mouth breathing in and out lifelessly.

”Ayaka…… What’s wrong with you?”

”Minagawa…… Mnn, mnn, it’s nothing…… No……”

Perhaps she knows him? Does Ayaka know Minagawa Kengo? I suddenly recalled how Ayaka looked like when she suddenly collapsed after looking at the monitor in Alice’s room. I thought that it was because she had a bad memory about ‘Angel Fix’ at the time, but there’s actually another possibility, which is Minagawa Kengo’s name.

”Do you know Minagawa Kengo?”

Ayaka covered her ears and shook her head violently in denial. That’s right, even if Ayaka hasn’t lost her memory, it’s impossible that she knows him. That’s because Minagawa Kengo was in the same year as Tetsu-senpai, so he should be about six years older than us. Besides, he left school already, so it’s impossible that he could stay at school along with Ayaka. However—

”Ayaka, please tell me if you know!”

I grabbed Ayaka’s shoulders and started to shake her violently.

”I- I don’t know! Don’t know! I can’t remember……”

”Please, remember it—“

”Fujishima-kun, please stop that!”

Suddenly the piercing metallic sound of a chair being overturned rang through the whole greenhouse, while I kneeled on the ground. Sayuri-sensei was glaring viciously at me with her whole face reddened. Sensei squeezed between Ayaka and I, forcing us apart. When I realized that, regret started to well up in my heart as well.

What— did I do to Ayaka just now?

”It’s okay if you want to play detective, but please think while putting yourself in Shinozaki-san's shoes."

Sensei squatted beside me, saying in a tone that's so gentle that it's somewhat cruel. At the other side, Ayaka stared at me while being separated by sensei, trembling while supporting herself on the table.

"So…… rry—"

"If you want to apologize, please say it to Shinozaki-san."

While avoiding Sayuri-sensei's gaze, I stood up.

"Ayaka, Sorry, I'm……"

"I- it's okay, I'm the one who feels sorry. Not remembering anything, and I kept bringing trouble to Fujishima-kun……"

"There's no such thing. It isn't like that, erm, well……"

I heard my own voice, but it was empty. Harming the people who are still alive just to protect the deceased's name— just as Alice said. I don't have that resolution, but I kept harming Ayaka repeatedly……

Sensei gently placed her hands on Ayaka's shoulders, speaking quietly in her ears. I really couldn't bear to look on, so I scarpered from the greenhouse after picking up my bag on the floor. As I was about to walk to the school entrance through the courtyard, I noticed a silhouette at a corner of the greenhouse, where the flower racks formed a blind spot. The person seemed to have noticed me as well, and hurriedly left the greenhouse.

After I met the person's gaze, I realized that she was Kaoruko-senpai.

Seeing me being dazed, senpai sighed, as though she gave up on something.

"I didn't eavesdrop on your conversation deliberately……"

So she heard all of it…… But from when?

”Are you still investigating this meaningless thing? Please don’t investigate Tomohiko because of your personal interest, okay?”

It wasn’t hard to see how sad she was from Kaoruko-senpai’s expression. To search for Hayano Tomohiko’s forgotten words, how many people must Alice and I continue to harm?

“I’m not doing this because of personal intere……”

“Sayuri-sensei seems to be inside as well. I wanted to ask you to hurry up and tidy up the greenhouse, but since it looked like you’re busy inside, I’m telling you here. Please don’t drag things on anymore! The general meeting is on next week, while the effective date of the resolution is on next month!”

As I was thinking of how to answer her, Kaoruko-senpai turned around and walked away to the direction of the school buildings. I hurriedly chased her and said:

“P- please wait for a minute! Things haven’t been decided yet, have they?”

”Listen, the club president meetings passed the resolution, so it’s useless no matter how hard you and Kousaka work. Most of the clubs will agree with this during the plenary meeting.”

Without even turning around, Kaoruko-senpai answered me coolly.

”Hayano Tomohiko-senpai—“

When I blurted out the name, Kaoruko-senpai finally stopped, standing at the corner of the ladder at the west side of the school building.

”Didn’t die from being tormented…… by Tetsu-senpai and the members of the Gardening Committee.”

Kaoruko-senpai turned around. Her long hair swayed because of her movement like a pleated skirt, while the piercing radiance of the desert sun shone in her eyes.

”What are you talking about?”

I'm not sure, actually. Even Alice haven't grasped the truth, so of course I'm not certain about this as well. But there is a lava hot truth that hasn't cooled down into facts in my heart— Tetsu-senpai is definitely not a person who would do this kind of thing. If so, that means that someone in the case that we're discussing about is lying.

"Then why would Tomohiko—"

"I don't know yet."

With her eyes widened, Kaoruko-senpai heaved a long sigh.

"Is there something wrong with your brain?"

That might be the case, it's not strange even if people think that there's something wrong with my brain.

"I'm investigating about this. Senpai might not be able to forgive the Gardening Club, but the person who founded the Gardening Club might have his reasons……"

"That's irrelevant to this!"

After shouting that unconsciously, Kaoruko-senpai clenched her hands and bit her lips, trying hard to refrain her emotions that could explode at any time.

"Are you an idiot? I'm not abolishing the Gardening Club because of this kind of reason. Isn't Tomohiko irrelevant to this matter……?" Senpai's voice trembled slightly, and it was evident that she was lying. "I don't know what you misunderstood, but that's not my own decision. The teachers were talking about removing the greenhouse as well, while the General Executive division was diligently preparing to take care of these foamy clubs all along. It's too late no matter how much you investigate, so that's why I told you to prepare to clear away your stuff."

Among senpai's last few words, I could feel the pity and sorrow in her voice. But seeing me continue to look at her unhesitatingly, senpai flung her hair again, turned around and left.

It’s too late no matter how much you investigate…… Irrelevant to this matter…… Useless no matter what you do……

It really might be so. No, it’s probably like that now. I remember that Alice once said that I would think of something about Kaoruko-senpai wanting to abolish the Gardening Club. In the current stage, I haven’t done anything yet. Then what am I running here and there for? Even hurting Ayaka, and having to brawl with Tetsu-senpai……

I think this is probably because— because of the uneasiness for the place that I want to protect. Because I don’t even know why I want to protect it. Is the Gardening Club really a place that I should protect even though I have to dig out secrets from other people’s graves? I want to be certain about this.

Because there’s Ayaka and I. Is this reason not enough? I asked and answered myself, so the answer was revealed immediately. If I could continue my battle with just this reason, Ayaka and I wouldn’t turn out like this now. It’s the same for Alice. If things can resolve themselves, unresistingly accepting everything on this word, she wouldn’t need to shut herself in that cold room full of dolls.

And that’s the reason that we continue to be detectives.

*

”Does Ayaka know Minagawa Kengo?”

Even Alice was surprised by my statement. She sat on the bed in the office that was always had the air conditioning on, holding a can of Dr. Pepper while turning around to look at me with her eyes widened.

”…… It isn’t certain that things are like that.”

”Oh, I see, indeed— there is a possibility.” Alice hugged a smaller sized bear while staring at thin air.

”But it seems that Ayaka doesn’t remember it…… And he’s a person who dropped out too.”

”He’s an ex-member of the Gardening Club, so it’s possible that he got to know Ayaka by going back to school for a few times.”

”That’s not wrong, but……”

I sat in front of the bed, hugging my knees while staring at my toes.

I couldn’t just ask Ayaka about that, because Minagawa Kengo’s name might just be linked to her past memories.

I raised my head and observed Alice’s expression stealthily. She might just tell me ‘If you’re still a detective, then you should mercilessly dig out Ayaka’s thoughts hidden in her heart’…… Probably?

”That’s right, usually I would probably have no choice but to say that.”

Alice smiled in self-deprecation.

”But I don’t want to see Ayaka like that anymore. When you aren’t here in the room recently, I kept thinking in my room. Before being a NEET, before having the identity of a detective, being able to play a certain role should be a great thing, right?”

”…… A certain role?”

”That’s right, a certain role for other people. Tetsu, Major, and Hiro could be said as companions, Yondaime could be said as a brother, while most of the people in this world would probably be said as friends. This is a relationship that can only exist between a person and another, or that might be what we call ‘human’, right?”

The smile on Alice’s face at that moment looked as enigmatic as the morning fog. I could only feel a pain on my chest, and I couldn’t say it though I wanted to speak something.

”As for what Ayaka is thinking of, it has already sank into the sands at the depths of the river, nobody could know that. But I am afraid that digging it out again would hurt Ayaka, so I plan to just let it be sunk…… That way, I can still hire you with a dirt-cheap price. Do you still remember the employment contract?”

Alice leaned her face on her bent knees, smiling happily with her head tilted. Though Alice confused me by suddenly saying that, I remembered my previous lesson, and thought before I questioned her.

”…… Ah, ahhh, mnn.”

I remembered it. Didn’t I suggest that myself?

Last winter, it happened during the Angel Fix incident. Alice’s aim was not to expose the truth of the situation, and was not to exterminate an organization that creates drugs, but for Ayaka. Why did Ayaka jump down from the top of the building? Only that suspicious point confused the NEET detective who claimed to be able to see through everything while being in her room.

The end of our contract was until ‘the mystery was solved’.

Since Ayaka hasn’t recovered her memories yet, the answer that Alice found was not confirmed by Ayaka, so that’s why I’m continuing to be her assistant detective— things should be like that in name.

”Besides, Minagawa Kengo’s trails could be located from other places.”

”…… Eh?”

”You can’t do anything about this matter. I will ask Yondaime to help. It might proceed unsuccessfully, and it might even completely overthrow the hypothesis that I suggested just now in the worst cases, so I can’t tell you about this yet.”

”…… I understand.”

The detective already said that she ‘can’t tell me right now’, so that means she absolutely wouldn’t tell me anything. This is also a basic principle that I as her assistant detective must carve in my heart.

”So it’s okay if you just do what you’re supposed to do.”

”Er…… Is there anything that I must investigate?”

I’ve already told her about the contents of the conversation between Sayuri-sensei and I, though she just nodded with an expression that looked as though she knew it long ago……

”What are you talking about? Don’t you have to meet Hiro? Why don’t you hurry ang go?”

”Ah, that matter……” I recalled our promise, and felt rather depressed all of a sudden.

”What do you mean by ‘that matter’!?” Alice suddenly shouted while kneeling on her bed. “Isn’t that about your own body!? What’s with your dazed look? Do you think you’re listening to news about a disaster that happened at the other side of the globe!”

”Nothing really, sorry…… I’ll go right away.”

I stood up and walked towards the entrance.

”I am supremely uninterested whether you win or lose. But you have to remember this, you’re my assistant detective. That means every piece of fingernail, every fragment of hair, and every drop of blood of yours are my tools! If you have the audacity to let them get hurt, I won’t forgive you!”

Alice’s blazing flames of fury was directed at my back, and I could only walk out of the office while sighing.

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The places that provide sexual services usually starts work at late night, so I originally thought that they only opened at night. But I’ve heard that most of these shops usually start business ten in the morning, and there are even women who work in the morning. On the other hand, the closing time is limited by the laws related to hotels, and they claim to the public that they open till midnight, but they actually open till five in the morning or so.

The soapland that called me to in the phone was at the corner area of the end of the hotel streets after walking all the way to the end of the main streets. Since it was already in the evening, there were quite a lot of customers inside. I hesitated for almost fifteen minutes on the road, and finally went to the back door in the end.

Hiro-san said this in the phone: ‘To win Tetsu, you have to undergo special training from today! I prepared a lot of secret stratagems, and along with Major’s help, you’re sure to win!’

Why must he choose to train at the soapland? I really don’t get it…… Stepping into the corridors in the shop, I saw two bags stuffed so full of towels that they were almost as tall as me, while there was a metal door that had almost all of its paint faded. I pushed it open.

”Erm…… Sorry for disturbing.”

The laughter of a lot of girls came from further inside the right corridors with the odor of chlorine drifting in the air, and there was also a familiar voice among them.

”Ah, ah, ah, sorry, I think he’s here. I’ll go take a look.”

A slim, thin man appeared in the corridor, a smile on his face. It was Hiro-san! My uneasy heart finally settled down, and I heaved a long sigh.

”Welcome, Narumi-kun. Hurry up, get in and close the door.”

With a smile on his face, Hiro-san waved to me, while a crowd of bubble princesses (the employees) poked their heads out of the room behind him to stare at me, making me feel rather embarrassed for a moment.

”Erm…… Why did you ask me out to a place like this?”

”Didn’t I tell you that you’re having special training? Wait a minute, I’ll call the shop owner.”

The shop owner is an okama[1]. It’s unmistakable, he’s a classic okama who makes people feel like framing him and sending him away for appraisal, and he’s a muscular guy as well. His chest was so muscular that it almost burst the shirt he was wearing and shot the buttons on his black vest away.

”So you’re Hiro-kun’s friend? You’re so cute∼” The muscled male shop owner observed me from head to foot, causing cold sweat to break out from my whole body. “Kid, remove your tie and your blazer and keep it somewhere. The police might come if someone sees a high school student in the shop. If something like that really happens, remember to say that you’re my brother.”

”O- okay……”

What a strange situation. I was really unwilling to stay even one second more in a place like this, but I could only take off my blazer unwillingly.

”If you’re willing to, it’s okay if you take off your shirt and your trousers as well.”

”Oh, no no no no no.”

His smile is so scaryyyyyyyyyyyy! I frantically shook my head until my neck almost broke off.

So the special training that Hiro-san spoke of was actually a normal cleanup of the bathroom.

”Listen, the basics of boxing is in guarding. Though that’s what Tetsu told me as well……”

Hiro-san explained at the entrance.

”So you must overcome something first, and that’s the pain when you’re blocking the opponent’s attack with your hands. To fight is to compare whose inner heart is tougher, so you must be used to the pain first. Even so, letting you join a real battle training all of a sudden is too hard, so it’s better if you start from cleaning up the bathroom.”

And then Hiro-san forced a long handled brush, a sponge brush and other cleaning equipment into my hands.

”I can’t comprehend this at all!”

”That’s why, I’m going to turn off the cold water in this bathroom from now, and you'll have to clean up with only hot water. Your hands would redden a lot, but if you get used to it……"

"I don't want to! Have mercy!"

But Hiro-san slammed the door shut in my face, and stood at the other side of the matte glass.

"Also, the bathroom is quite slippery because of lubricants and so on, so if you can walk on it without falling down, you can train your feet or movement as well….. probably?"

Is he kidding? Is it really true? And didn't he just say 'probably' just now?

"C- can this really achieve the effect of practice!?"

"Not really, most of what I just said was a joke."

"I'm going back, please open the door! Now, immediately!" I used the long handled brush to hammer the door.

"Calm down a bit. Cleaning this place up is actually your learning fee, the main point is…… You saw the shop owner just now right? He's a boxer before this as well, so I asked him to be your practice opponent."

The brushes and detergents slipped from my hands and fell onto the tiled floor.

"Just treat the cleaning up as a warm up! I'm counting on you."

The size of the bathroom was about two times larger than my bedroom, so it's quite tiring having to clean it up. Since it was linked with the bedroom, instead of saying that it's just a bathroom, it's more like a hotel room with an extra large bathroom. There was a large pad dirtied by a sticky unknown substance in the bathroom, and also an oddly shaped chair that sank down in the middle. When I cleaned up these things with hot water, a question suddenly surfaced in my heart— where did my life go wrong?

I originally thought that I only had to clean up one, but I was dragged away to clean three more. Judging from the smells, heat and water vapor filling the bathrooms, it's unmistakable, a couple probably did something in this space two minutes before I came in to clean up! I suddenly thought seriously that I should just go die.

The final fatal strike happened when I was cleaning the third bathroom, and the shop owner suddenly appeared. He wore boxing shorts with a sports vest that faintly showed his hairy chest, while boxing gloves were on his hands. The shop owner threw similar gloves and shorts to me while saying:

"Kiddy, hurry up and change your clothes! Do you know how to wear the knee pads? Do you need me to help you?"

Hiro-san, don't just laugh secretly while standing at the entrance! Hurry up and save me! And why must we battle in the bathroom!?

"Because there's a large mat in here, so it's safer even if you fall down."

"That's right, I will think of ways to make you fall down many times~!" The shop owner said while winking at me, making me feel defeated even though I haven't started fighting yet.

It was about six in the evening when I was exhaustedly thrown out of the back door to the street full of neon lights. Hiro-san who walked out with me patted my shoulders while saying:

"Find me about this time this whole week."

"Do you want me to die!"

"If you don't have the resolution to kill, you would not be able to win against Tetsu."

I sighed for the umpteenth time that day, and followed Hiro-san closely on the pavement. Since my eye swelled up because of being punched, the lights on the street looked rather foggy.

"Narumi-kun, didn't you ask Tetsu to teach you boxing before this? If the disciple tries only in areas that the master taught, then he would never be able to defeat him. That's why I feel that the shop owner there is the most suitable, and he even agreed to my unreasonable request."

Though Hiro-san's thoughts touched me so much that I almost cried, is he really okay? Was he asked by the shop owner to marry him?

"Hey, if there's anything else that I can help out with, just say it. You know it as well, since we told Alice that we wouldn't help out this time, we're super free right now."

Hiro-san might have tried to show an ironic smile, but because of his face, it had a hint of kindness in it no matter how hard he tried.

"Apart from Tetsu's matter— I want to do all I can for Ayaka as well."

"Thank….. you."

I weakly nodded to Hiro-san in gratitude.

But there's nothing that I have to ask him for now. That's because I haven't decided what to do yet.

"Is it possible that you haven't decided yet?"

Being asked by Hiro-san again, I really didn't know what to answer. I could only shut my mouth, following the crowd down the slope to the station.

"…… Narumi-kun, do you like gardening?"

Hiro-san asked me while we were walking through the underpass.

"Eh? No…… It's still okay, I don't like it particularly much."

"Though you say that, you still stayed in the Gardening Club for quite some time, right?"

“Mnn?” That's because the club would be closed down if I leave.

”If the Gardening Club is abolished, would you feel troubled?”

”Of course.”

”Why?”

”Well—“

I swallowed the words that I originally wanted to say. That was a question that I have been setting aside.

Ayaka once said that I really don’t need to fight with Tetsu-senpai if it’s just to protect the scenes of the past so that she could recover her memories, and she said that she would use her own power to work hard and recover her memories, and so she wishes that I wouldn’t do such dangerous things anymore.

That was what I thought at the start— I thought that I tried with all my effort to protect the place that only belonged to us so that Ayaka would remember her memories. Until Ayaka said that, I finally understood that things weren’t so. Working hard so that Ayaka would remember me would be too stupid.

That’s because Ayaka is already back, and is by my side right now.

As for the memories of the past— what does that matter?

Even so……

”Because when Ayaka is at school…… It seems like she’s only happy in the Gardening Club.”

I finally answered in a low voice in the crowd, while Hiro-san nodded while smiling.

”So you’re doing this completely because of Ayaka, right? It’s not for yourself.”

That’s right. The reason is actually just that simple.

Ayaka looked really happy when she’s taking care of the flowers. Even if she lost her memories now, she would smile naturally when she was picking seeds and pruning the plants. That’s why I want to protect the flowers in the flowerbeds and the greenhouse, and Ayaka who was among them. That was why I wanted to fight Tetsu-senpai as well.

I finally understood now— understanding what the thing that I wanted to protect is.

I actually found out only now……

I suddenly stopped walking when we were at the center of the zebra crossings. Hiro-san hurriedly rushed bag and grabbed my hand after realizing that.

”Narumi-kun, what’s wrong? The lights are turning red soon!”

”…… Eh? Ah, th- that’s right, sorry……”

I felt a blast of wind on my back because of the passing cars when I was walking past the road. I drew out my emotions just now with my fingers again.

Kaoruko-senpai and the other large clubs wanted to abolish the Gardening Club, which had a small structure but used a large budget, while I wanted to protect the flowers and Ayaka.

If that’s so…… There’s actually a way that the club could continue while not going against the Student Council.

Wait…… Could that really work? Or is it more realistic to look for Kaoruko-senpai directly and ask her to revoke her suggestion of the amendment of the rules?

As I hesitated about the answer, the lights on the ‘Hanamaru Ramen’ signboard could already be seen in front of us.

”This program is called the ‘Boxer in a Week using Arm Casts’, a software that I programmed called ‘Wii Tetsu’. It’s a game that can be used with boxing glove sensors. With this game, the boxing game in Wii Sports is far inferior to this, because you can battle Tetsu-san at home.”

Major started to stack a pile of stuff on the wooden stand behind the kitchen backdoor.

”…… Why can you make the software of a Wii game?”

”I know quite a lot of people working at game companies. The toolkit for making Wii games is really easy to use but quite useful.”

Then why don’t you just go work at a games company……?

”The word ‘work’ does not exist in my dictionary. What does that mean, actually?”

”Okay, okay……” I could only sigh because of his answer.

”Major, isn’t this thing a bit tight? Could you really wear this?”

Hiro-san pointed at the arm cast— the thing that looked more like some straps entangled with strong springs, while saying.

”It’s hard to put on or take off if two people aren’t helping. Hiro-san, please help out with this. Vice Admiral Fujishima, hurry up and take off your coat.”

”I don’t want to!”

In the end I was pressed down by the two who had completely entered training mode, and was forced to wear the arm cast without wearing anything on my upper torso. The stranger thing was, there was even a part used for the lower body (Since I can’t just take off all my clothes, they put it directly outside my slacks) The spring pinched my flesh, it hurts!

”This cast is really excellent, it could pull you up forcibly even if you’re knocked down by the opponent, making a pre-battle stance. Since it’s still in the experimental stage, please be the guinea pig, Vice Admiral Fujishima.”

”Don’t play around with other people’s body!”

”Heh! This thing is actually quite fun!” Hiro-san said while pounding my shoulder. At the instant when I almost fell, the springs on the cast started to take action, changing my body back to a battle stance without my permission. I feel that my muscles are screaming for help…

”Fujishima…… san?”

Major and Hiro-san turned their heads over after hearing the voice, and saw Ayaka standing at the end of the alley, poking her head inside hesitantly.

”Ah…… Is the supplementary lesson over? Was sensei angry? Because I left without permission……”

”She said that she’ll give you twice the homework tomorrow. W-what’s wrong with you!? Your face is swollen again……”

”Ah— it’s okay, this is just a slight boxing practice. Ayaka, you’re here to see Narumi-kun’s majestic stance as well?”

Since it was hard for her to refuse Hiro-san’s enthusiastic invitation, Ayaka walked cautiously into the small alley.

”Erm…… Well…… Just now—“

”I’m really sorry for just now.”

”It’s fine, I’m the one who’s at fault, I’m really sorry.”

”Narumi-kun, sorry for interrupting when you’re discussing things, apologizing with your current stance looks really dumb.”

”So that’s why I’m asking you to hurry up and take it off!”

After having a closer look, I noticed that Ayaka was trying hard not to laugh as well. Sigh, I really feel like crying……

”Erm….. What are you guys doing?” Ayaka asked Major.

”We’re doing special training for Vice Admiral Fujishima. We’re using the power of science to obtain victory!”

The kitchen backdoor suddenly opened, while Min-san poked her head out of it.

”Don’t you guys keep harassing Ayaka, hurry up and scram! Narumi, you’re not an employee anymore, so—“

Seeing my hands with the boxing gloves on it raised to my chin, (appearing to be) full of confidence, Min-san couldn’t help but furrow her brows.

”Narumi? What is it, do you want to have a fight?”

”Ah, no, that’s not it……”

My words were completely ignored, and I was pummeled to the floor. Even so, Major’s gadget was really effective. I stood up again with my hands raised and a pre-battle stance.

”What’s with your resisting attitude! Perhaps you’re bearing a grudge on me because I fired you?”

”Ah, no, it’s because of the gadget……” “Shut up!”

And I was covered in dust and soil once again, but was pulled back because of the spring.

”Your tenacity is quite good. I’ll beat you up until you can’t stand up anymore!”

”I’m telling you that It’s because of the gadget……”

After she finished beating me around like a tumbler(?), she brought Ayaka back into the kitchen.

I was really badly beaten up. At the instant when I was about to lose consciousness but still stood up in a battle stance majestically, Major muttered to himself in self-satisfaction:

”I’m really too excellent. You can just wear this thing the whole week!”

Are you insane!? Take it off! Please help me take it off! I’m begging you guys……!

It was quite late when Tetsu-senpai came to the shop, it was about nine or so.

”Master, can you give me some shaved ice?” Senpai poked his head into the shop after pushing away the portiere.

”You’re not eating ramen?”

”I’m on a diet.”

Senpai walked to out of the kitchen backdoor, sitting right in front of me.

”Can you eat ice even when you’re dieting?” Major asked.

”Shaved ice is the secret weapon when you’re on a diet, don’t you know that? It can hydrate you, and it easily makes people feel full because of the sugar.”

”Heh, so that means you can eat it when you’re on a diet? I’m going to tell the girls next time.” Hiro-san answered.

Nobody asked senpai for the reason that he’s dieting, because there’s really nothing to ask. Even so……

”Erm…… Is that for boxing?” I asked in uneasiness.

”I don’t really mind the weight. I just feel that my movements will turn slow if my weight doesn’t decrease.”

Please don’t let his movement become even faster than now……

”By the way, what is this thing?”

Tetsu-senpai looked at the gadget on the wooden stand while asking.

”Fufufu, I can’t sell out information to the enemy, I can only say that this is a secret weapon for Vice Admiral Fujishima to defeat

Tetsu-san after a weak.”

You’ve already told him some information……

”Hmph, is that so. This is probably for muscle training, right? Oh, those things that you put on your limbs.”

”Tetsu, you can’t wear that alon—“

Hiro-san’s voice diminished as he saw Tetsu-senpai pulling away the spring easily, putting it on his upper torso.

”This thing is quite tight.” Though he said that, Tetsu-senpai made a banzai pose, then stretched out his hands, dumbfounding the three of us. Even worse, senpai wasn’t even a bit affected by the cast on him, eating the almond shaved ice that Ayaka took out like nothing happened.

And he even took it off himself, placing it on the wooden stand in the end. At that moment, Major suddenly stood up and shouted: “I must increase the strength of the spring fifteen times more!” while I frantically stopped him.

”That’s right, Narumi, when are you planning to fight?”

”Well……”

I couldn’t answer. When am I able to defeat him? I should say, can I really defeat him?

I have no other choice but to defeat him, but there’s no more time now.

”How about next week?” Hiro-san answered for me. “We’ll decide the place as well.”

”I don’t really care. What about you, Narumi?”

I nodded after thinking for awhile. The Student Council meeting is on next Friday, so many things would end if I don’t win by Monday.

”By the way, what would happen if Narumi-kun wins?” Hiro-san stared at my face.

If I win—

”…… That would prove Tetsu-senpai’s innocence.”

”See? I have no idea what this guy is talking about.”

”Really? I understand that just fine.”

”Me too.”

The three of them laughed together after looking at each other. Being able to laugh at this time is also their strong points. I couldn’t laugh at all……

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Unusually, I stayed until the closing time of the ramen shop as well, so I took Ayaka to the station.

”If there’s not a reasonable explanation, I’ll be angry.”

As usual, Ayaka walked at a position about three steps in front of me, asking me while walking backwards.

”Why must you fight Tetsu-san? I heard that he was a boxer in the past. Fujishima-san, you’re just an indoors-type who would pant even when you move a bucket, isn’t that right? You might not get off the hook with just some injuries……”

”Not really, it isn’t really a fight……”

Then what is it? It’s really hard to explain.

”Don’t just brush it past like this, please tell me the true reason!”

Ayaka looked as though she was going to cry, so I could only stop, sigh and gulp.

I’ll just start from the beginning.

”Do you remember the matter about the Student Council that I’ve mentioned before?”

Ayaka nodded while walking backwards.

”Hayano Tomohiko-senpai— the incident of the death of the Student Council president’s brother, that’s the reason for the Gardening Committee’s abolishment. Because Tetsu-senpai and a few others abused Hayano Tomohiko, he died.”

Ayaka supported herself on the railings while standing in the lights of the streetlights, staring at me.

”Actually, the ones who forced the opening of the Gardening Club was the people who bullied Hayano-senpai…… The Student Council and the others think that these people must have an unspeakable reason for the founding of the club, but……”

Someone must have lied in the process. That was what I believed.

At least, Tetsu-senpai is definitely not a person who would do these kind of things.

”I’m thinking— to senpai, there might be a truth that he couldn’t tell anyone. It was on the day of the incident……”

To senpai, that might be a serious blunder that he couldn’t forgive himself for even if he dropped out.

”But I still wish to know the reason that the Gardening Club was forcibly founded. If this reason is reasonable, then I would talk things out with the Student Council president no matter what, and ask her not to abolish the club.”

”Why must you do this?”

Why? You’re asking me why?

If it was Alice, she would probably answer like this: Because I’m a detective, and I’ve accepted a request.

Then, how should I answer as an assistant detective?

I stood outside the range of the rays given out by the streetlights, silently accepting Ayaka's gaze, and said:

”Actually…… I have absolutely no interest in the activities of the Gardening Club, and I didn't even go to take care of the flowerbeds during the spring break; and I'm even clueless about the structure of a greenhouse, not even touching it. However……”

I recalled the promise that I made to Ayaka on the rooftop that day. It had been sealed, and I've only went there once since then.

”I've promised this to Ayaka, though you probably don't remember this. We promised each other to join each other's club— the Computer Club where only I was left and the Gardening Club where only Ayaka was left— so that we would not lose the place that we support ourselves on.”

Ayaka bit her lips while closing her eyes and shook her head.

”…… I'm sorry.”

Ayaka stood on her original spot while using her hands to hug her own body.

”Was I the one who suggested that first?”

”Yeah— ah, but it's okay if you don't remember it. I don't mean that. To me, going to the computer club or not doesn't matter now, but I still continued the activities of the Gardening Club. Because you looked happy when you taught me things.”

”Eh……?”

”Don't you like taking care of flowers?”

The long wait made people think that the sky is getting breaker. Ayaka finally nodded lightly after hesitating for a long time, and I finally sighed in relief. This is the most important reason. I finally realized that when Hiro-san asked.

”If that's so, then let's go on. I'll think of a way to let the club continue to exist.”

”You’re…… going to fight Tetsu-san because of this reason?”

That’s right. I’m going to fight Tetsu-senpai because of this.

”But…… It’s just for my interest. Just for such a small matter……”

”That’s not a small matter. If there aren’t any flowers in the school, it would probably be very lonely.

”Even so, there’s only two members in our club, and it’ll still be—“

I stuffed my hand into my pocket, taking out the object in it and handed it to Ayaka to prevent her from continuing.

Ayaka’s expression was as surprised as it was on a certain day. She took the thing and opened it. A black armband with an orange logo printed on it. The letter in C was G, the innermost one was a circled M.

”This is……?”

Of course Ayaka doesn’t remember that, but it doesn’t matter. The meaning of me handing this to her is different from before, after all. And then, I continued to take out a few more similar armbands from my pocket.

”The armband of the Gardening Club, that’s Ayaka’s. And there’s a lot more too. We’ll look for more members after this, but if the flowerbeds and the greenhouse are gone, we can’t recruit more members then.”

Ayaka stared at the pieces of black cloths in my hands, and pressed her own armband to her chest. With her eyes closed, it seemed as though she was holding back tears, and also like she was trying to think of something to answer.

”…… W- why?”

Ayaka asked with her head lowered.

”Why…… are you doing so much for me? B- because, I just can’t remember things about you……”

The words that she said froze in the air, gradually dropping onto the dark asphalt road.

”But when I tried to remember, it felt like I was going to remember something just now…… I probably know this person called Minagawa. He's…… an ex-member from the Gardening Club, right? With a square face and sleek eyes……”

She indeed knows Minagawa. However—

”Ayaka, just forget about it. Don't worry about this anymore.”

”But whenever I try to think of it, it's like there's a huge black hole in my heart. I felt like looking inside, but I'm afraid of being sucked inside…… So scared, I'm so scared. Even with my back to it, I'm still scared…… I don't know why, but I actually did such a thing, actually…… Jumping from the building…… but…….”

”Don't say anymore! It doesn't matter now, I don't want you to remember anything……”

”Then…… Then, what whould I do?”

Ayaka said to me with tears glistening in her eyes:

”I- I kept saying cruel things to you—“

”No. You didn't do anything bad.”

Didn't you get healthy again and come back to see me?

It's already enough for me. It's really enough— but why did it make her show such a sorrowful expression? I don't know what to do as well……

It felt as though I should say something more. But at that moment, the noisy sounds of an exhaust and sounds of pebbles being crushed came from my back with a strong light.

The bus drove past our sides. Ayaka looked at its silhouette with tears in her eyes, and ran towards the sign of the bus stop ten meters or so in front of us. In the process, she turned around to look at me for a few times, but I did not continue to speak to her.

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When I went to school the next day, I immediately walked to the greenhouse. The matter that Alice asked me to help out in her message— she originally wanted me to investigate the manufacturer of the greenhouse and the model, but I couldn't find the information anywhere. I wanted to ask at the staff's office, but I really didn't know who to ask, so I could only wait in front of the entrance. Finally, I could only look for Kousaka-senpai at the Inspection's office to ask for her help. In the end, I didn't even have any time to see Ayaka.

After class, I immediately rushed to the building where Hanamaru Ramen was at.

As I was about to open the door to the office, the sound of conversation between two people came from inside.

"…… This is obviously a gift from playing pachinko, how could it be sewn tightly?"

"But….. I never thought that its eyes would drop out just one time after I hugged it!"

Alice hugged her blanket on her bed, looking like she was going to cry, while Yondaime in a crimson coat was in front of her. The object that was on the knee of the young yakuza was the kitten doll that Tetsu-senpai gave Alice, while the button that was his eye was about to drop off.

At the instant when he noticed me entering the room, Yondaime widened his eyes and sewed on the button with lightning speed, then pushed the doll back to Alice, stuffing his portable sewing kit back into his pockets immediately.

"Why didn't you press the doorbell before you entered!"

"S- sorry, I didn't think that Yondaime would be here."

It seems that I've been going in and out of the office as I like recently, but when I think closer about this, this is actually a girl's room…… Mostly.

”As Patronius almost lost its sight, I asked Yondaime to come over. Thank you for saving my new friend. Thank you very much.”

Alice hugged the kitten doll while smiling gently. After a ‘Hmph!’, Yondaime stood up and leaned on the wall at the entrance of the bedroom.

”I helped out about that voluntarily. But don't forget the true jobs of you and I.”

”I know. For your help, I will repay it by transferring some money to your account. This is a thread that we can't follow without your help after all.”

”Did you find out about something?” I interjected.

”We found out a bit about what Minagawa Kengo did after he dropped out.”

Really? Doesn't that mean that we found out about quite a lot? But even so, Yondaime glared at me with a stern gaze. Does that mean that it's a bad news?

The news that came from Alice the next moment almost made me forget how to breathe.

”He had contact with ‘Angel Fix’ from an early stage. The time when Hirasaka-gumi found out about its danger and started to clear the streets was last September, but he was addicted to it even earlier. And then he got into contact with the manufacturers and dealing organization led by Hakamizaka Shirou. He was one of the said people who could ‘see angels’ as well.”

Yondaime glared at me while nodding.

“During that time, Hakamizaka and co. were looking for places that they could use to plant the plant. Using only Hakamizaka's greenhouse could not accommodate the need of the market, while

Minagawa Kengo appeared that time. He was only one of the old customers that time, and did not actively provide assistance. But Minagawa Kengo accidentally exposed the news that ‘there’s a high class greenhouse at M High’, and there was also a path near the greenhouse leading outside the school— knowing that would be enough. That’s because……”

Wait a minute……! I wanted to interrupt Alice, but I couldn’t say anything.

What does this mean? No matter how great Yondaime is, he couldn’t get so much information that it was like he saw it with his own eyes, could he? No matter it’s Minagawa or Hakamizaka, all of them were already—

I suddenly thought of something— Minagawa Kengo, Angel Fix, M High— the vital clue that connects these things, there was another person other than Ayaka.

Alice continued to say:

“Because Toshi is here.”

“All of this…… was heard from Toshi-san?”

Yondaime answered in displease:

“Don’t ask me how I asked this……”

Toshi-san, Shinozaki Toshio, Ayaka’s brother. He was once one of the members of the Angel Fix drug dealing organization, the man who asked Ayaka to plant the poppy plants. I heard that he’s already out of the police hospital, and is currently under custody.

Perhaps Yondaime had contact with Toshi-san? I suddenly felt a chill in my heart.

He actually found so much information— using his sharp wolf claws.

“As for how the drug organization found out about the place leading to the greenhouse entrance, we don’t know that yet. The siblings don't usually socialize much, so it's impossible that Ayaka told her brother. But that explanation would be reasonable……"

Alice's face fell, and she stared at her fingers on the bed.

"The source of the information was from one of the early addicts of Angel Fix, Minagawa Kengo. Toshi couldn't count as a member of the organization, but one of the usual customers. But he was noticed by Hakamizaka Shirou. To find a person who could assist him in the planting of poppy plants in the M High greenhouse, there was no other way."

Angel Fix, Hakamizaka Shirou.

Even though he already turned to dust, he's still making trouble. Why don't he just disappear quickly? It's better if he didn't exist in the first place.

"I heard that Minagawa Kengo often went back to the school even after he dropped out. Toshi said that he probably met Ayaka a few times, right?"

Facing Alice's questions, Yondaime nodded silently.

"Back to school…… Why?"

"We're not sure about that yet." Alice answered weakly.

Not sure…… Only two people know the truth, one died because of drug overdose, the other one jumped down from the top of a building.

Nobody continued to speak. As for how we could know more, the three in the room knew of it very well.

And they knew that there were no other way as well……

Yondaime and I walked out of the office at the same time. For some reason, I felt somewhat weak, and I held the railings of the stairs, squatting down after that.

"Gardening Club kid, what are you doing?"

“…… Nothing, it’s just that I’m a bit tired because of business.”

When I think about it, Yondaime’s title for me seemed to have been fixed now. If he starts to call me by another name right now, I probably wouldn’t know what to do.

“The things that I can investigate end here. I really didn’t think that he would ask me such an exaggerated thing.”

“How’s Toshi-san right now?” Can he still speak?

“I heard that he wasn’t too good with his dad, and he started to close himself away again.”

I heard that Ayaka and Toshi-san’s parents were on a divorce case right now, and are living separately right now. Toshi-san and Ayaka both lived with their parents before this, but after he got out of the police hospital— so that he would not affect Ayaka, Toshi-san was brought to his father’s house.

“I forced him out of his room and beated him up, but he still had some energy to speak.”

This person really does too much.

“But that guy seems to know almost nothing. You’ll have to think about the rest yourself.”

Me, think of something myself? I walked here and there already, but there was still no progress……

“Aren’t you planning to beat Tetsu up to ask something?”

“Ah— er, it’s not wrong……” I looked at my fists. “But I don’t think that I can defeat him, and even if I could defeat him, it’s no guarantee that I could get any important news.”

And besides, the person who’s asking is not me, but Alice. Even if senpai really hid something, he might really not know anything about the situation.

Yondaime placed his elbows on the rails, looking at me with the expression of a dead cricket.

“Are you an idiot? Then what are you fighting for?”

“Well……”

No matter how I explain, I would probably be scolded or being treated as an idiot, right?

“Even if senpai doesn’t know anything about the incident, as long as I win, he’ll probably tell me the truth, right? Then, that would be able to prove that the fact that senpai abused Hayano Tomohiko to death was a lie. That’ll be the best if so……”

“Oh please, do you really know what you’re talking about? Where are there idiots like you in this world, using a fight to prove the other party’s innocence?”

“Well—“ That may be so, but there’s really no need for Yondaime to repeat that. The thing that I am about to do, is really stupid to the max.

“Then what would you do, Yondaime?”

“I would beat Tetsu up as well.”

Then isn’t that the same as me!

“Who’s the same as you! I’m beating him up because I’m annoyed that he lied, and it’s unrelated to the case that Alice is investigating.”

“That’s….. not wrong, but……”

“And if you only want to prove that Tetsu is innocent, you won long ago.”

“…… Huh?”

I stared at the side of Yondaime’s face with my jaw open.

“Because he already accepted your challenge. If he didn’t lie, why would he accept a challenge like this? Wouldn’t he just refuse with a smile right there and then?”

“Ah……”

I see, so that’s why!

“If you don’t know even that, and even gave the condition of ‘not meddling again if you lose’. You’re really an incurable idiot. If there aren’t any information on Tetsu’s hands, wouldn’t you waste your effort? Why don’t you just force the information out from Ayaka? Didn’t she remember Minagawa’s name already?”

“Yondaime, you’re really a logical type! Maybe you’re more suited to being an assistant detective than me……?”

“I’m not doing that. Oi, don’t change the topic! Why are you taking action for? If this goes on, wouldn’t the Gardening Club be abolished for no reason at all? And don’t you wish for that girl to recover her memories as well? If she remembers it, wouldn’t all of this be solved now?”

“You’re not wrong, but……”

I stared at the sky that was dyed red between the two buildings.

“If Ayaka isn’t willing to remember it because it’s too painful, then I think it’s better to just forget it. Besides, being friends once again would be okay, wouldn’t it?”

In the incident during the summer break, Meo once told me that things that have been lost would not come back again, but as long as we’re still alive, the new sprouts will be able to cover the previous sorrow one day.

Yondaime suddenly interrupted my thoughts, silently pointing at a place out of the railings below me and him.

“Why don’t you just tell her yourself?”

I saw Ayaka poking her head cautiously between the buildings, approaching the large steel buckets and beer crates that nobody were there, and she opened the kitchen backdoor. I was startled, and immediately squatted down to hide myself.

“Min-san, is Fujishima-san over here?”

The sounds of the conversation could faintly be heard.

“If you want to, I can push you down from here immediately.”

“No, no thanks, no need for the trouble!”

“You’re really an incurable idiot. Didn’t you say it yourself? Just hurry up and tell her everything, and start again.”

“Well…… I haven’t prepared myself mentally yet.”

Yondaime turned around, preparing to walk down the stairs, and left me aside after saying:

“What an unproductive fellow.”

Yondaime was right. Hearing the clacking sounds of him walking down the stairs, I started to think of how to leave without being noticed by Ayaka, because I really don’t know what to say to her.

After the battle ends…… Will that day really arrive?

“Then, there’s only one way left.”

Yondaime turned around and said.

“Beat Tetsu up completely, until he spits out all of the truth.”

After raising his fists highly, my sworn brother disappeared from the stairs. Until his silhouette completely disappeared, I finally raised my fists in response.

To the dumb me right now, the only thing worth trying— is defeating Tetsu-senpai.

There’s only one week left. What else can I do?

1. ↑ A guy who acts like a girl

Chapter 5

Ichinomiya Tetsuo.

The eldest son of a carpenter. Because of his father's acts of violence, he accepted the protection of the Social Welfare Committee a few times before he even graduated from primary school.

His father vanished when he was only twelve, and his family owed loan sharks a debt of over four million yen that time. His mother was hospitalized because of a mental breakdown, and thus Ichinomiya Tetsuo was moved to his mother's elder brother's house. However, he did not get along with his relatives who took him in, became a delinquent student in middle school, and once accepted counseling over twenty times.

During his second year in middle school, the police officers in the Youth Criminal Bureau introduced him to boxing. The head of the boxing alley realized his natural talent, and thus he left his uncle's house to stay at the head's house. From that day on, Ichinomiya Tetsuo turned over a new leaf, successfully furthering his studies by entering M High.

"The part that I want you to read is the next one. And there's a medical report enclosed as well."

Alice said while sitting on her bed.

After I returned from school, Alice called me to the detective agency, and she ordered me to closely read through Tetsu-senpai's personal information that I did not read before this.

I held the stack of information while leaning against the fridge, and couldn't help but gasp when I read the information written on the next page.

"Do you understand why I forced you to read this now?"

My eyes were completely glued to the paper, and I nodded while reading it.

Indeed, there is a reason for her request. If so, Tetsu-senpai—

”To your actions that could only be explained as imbecilic no matter which angle you look at, it should help more or less, right?”

”Well...... That’s not wrong, but......”

Do I really have to use this? Or should I say I have no other choice but to use this? Even so, it’s undeniable that to a person as weak as me, I’ll have to do things by hook or by crook.

Alice kneeled, saying in a frustrated tone:

”Didn’t you mean this when you said that you wanted to confirm the truth about Tetsu?”

I blankly stared at the NEET detective’s face for awhile, then shifted my gaze to the papers in my hands and nodded. Now I see, things are indeed so.

”Of course, wanting to use that could only be said as empty talk. It’s the same no matter how good your observation power is. And that means, even after I used this software that I pilfered from a certain research centre to analyze Tetsu’s fighting actions, that was the conclusion formed. This stack and that stack are sets of advice that I obtained from a boxing expert I got to know from the internet, while this is an emergency first aid manual, this stack contains ways of begging for mercy in sixty five languages, and here’s a set of references of reasons for running away at the last second.”

I was still clueless about the situation, but Alice still placed stack after stack of thick information onto my leg.

”These might still be insufficient, so please do some thorough research, and look for a way for you to go survive the battle!”

”Errr...... I’m really grateful for you being so worried about me......”

”Didn’t I tell you quite a few times now? I’m not worried about you!”

Alice was so furious that she almost rushed over from the bed to bite me.

”Even if you’re beaten black and blue by Tetsu, the detective’s investigation and the client’s life still continues, and there’s still a lot of matters for you to investigate!”

”Ahhhh, mnn, sorry……”

I stood up after putting down the stacks of information. The face of Alice, who was kneeling on the bed, was about in front of my chest.

”I promise you.” I placed my hands on Alice’s shoulders. “I will not die for no reason at all.”

”W- what nonsense are you spouting!”

Alice pushed my hands away, huffily turning to the monitor.

The ways of begging for mercy probably isn’t much use, but the analysis of Tetsu-senpai’s movements should help more or less. But since they were very complicated information, I might not be able to understand it.

”Cleaning up the mess that your moronic actions brought about ends here. Don’t forget your own job.”

”What else do we have to investigate?”

”Some matters about the crime scene. Go take some photos at the greenhouse.”

”Again? Why? Didn’t we take some in the Angel Fix incident?”

And what’s with the crime scene?

”This time, please check out the floorboards and the walls thoroughly as well. There shouldn’t be any flowerpots on the ground currently, isn’t that right? I want to look for blood stains.”

”Blood stains? Whose?”

”Of course it’s Hayano Tomohiko’s.”

My mind sank into confusion, so I could only lean against the wall at the entrance of the bedroom while pondering Alice’s words.

”…… Does that mean Hayano Tomohiko fainted at the greenhouse?”

”That’s right. There aren’t any blood stains at the place by the school entrance where he collapsed at, isn’t that right? That indicates that the place that he fainted at wasn’t there, but another place.”

”That…… Isn’t wrong, but……”

Another place? In the greenhouse?

”But that doesn’t seem right as well. Tetsu-senpai and the others should have asked Hayano Tomohiko to be their errand boy, buying things for them, while they stayed in the greenhouse to wait.”

”Have you even forgotten what you, yourself, had said? Tetsu is definitely hiding something, you said that yourself.”

”Ah……”

That’s right, my thoughts are built on the basis that Tetsu-senpai’s testimony was a lie. However—

”What does that mean? Does it mean someone moved the unconscious Hayano Tomohiko to the school entrance? Why?”

”That’s a possibility as well, and Tetsu might have been the person who moved him. That way, you can explain the contradictions of the direction that Hayano Tomohiko was collapsed and also the reason that nobody noticed him before Tetsu.”

Why was that done? Who did it? Was it senpai?

”I don’t know the answer as well, so that’s why I’m asking you to investigate.”

”…… But it can’t be in the greenhouse. The greenhouse has a cement floor after all, and rainwater can’t flow inside. If there was really so much blood, stains should still be there even now.”

I recalled the location where Akaya jumped down to. The ground that was paved with cement located between the garden and the school buildings. That happened during January. It snowed and rained quite a few times after the incident, but the stains were still there. Things like blood stains are hard to erase both from reality and from our hearts.

”Anyways, just hurry up and investigate it. If the place where Hayano Tomohiko was collapsed at was not the location where he was first found, then the chances of him having collapsed in the greenhouse increases drastically. By the way, go ask your advisor if anything was spread or placed on the greenhouse floor that time.”

”…… Got it. I’ll go check it out tomorrow.”

”There’s another matter apart from that, one that even I cannot find out. That is the teaching equipment management list.”

”…… Eh?”

”Buying or getting rid of teaching equipments would leave a record, right? I wish to know of the changes in amount of this. This information can probably be obtained from the school’s Management office. Your school is too outdated, not even storing data in the computer folders, so that’s why I couldn’t find out about it.”

”This…… What does that have to do with this?”

”Can you please get rid of your bad habit of asking the detective the reason for her investigations in each and every matter?”

Alice turned her head around and looked at me with a thoroughly annoyed expression.

”I don’t know if there are any connections, so that’s why I’m investigating. My assumptions and thread of thoughts spread out to weave a web of ten thousand possibilities, liquefying all of them to make it easier for your brain of sponge to absorb is too much of a hassle. I'll say it's better if you just shut your mouth and take actions."

Okay, okay, I get it.

While holding the digital camera that Alice lent me and the massive pile of information of how to cope with Tetsu-senpai, I walked out of the office. It was just a bit cloudy when I came, but now it's pouring. Drops of rain hammered on the emergency stairs that was made of metal, harrying people with its noisiness.

It was then the monsoon season, near the end of May. At the same time, Ayaka's and my shelter was about to be trampled on, torn apart, vanishing without a trace.

When I walked to the kitchen backdoor, Major and Hiro-san were already waiting there, and that made me lose my energy.

"Here, we're having special training today as well. The shop owner praised that even though your boxing skills aren't much, your actions of cleaning is quite thorough!" Hiro-san said with a smile on his face. I don't feel happy at all being praised in such a matter. It seems that I have to undergo three hours of hellish training today as well……

"Since the weather is so bad today, you might be asked to clean up the entrance."

"…… Why do I feel like the job is deviating from its original purpose?"

I even feel like I'm being treated as a free cleaning tool…… Hiro-san smiled while saying 'I'll go get the car then', then walked out from the alley. This time, it was Major's turn to lean over with a smile on his face, taking out a box from his backpack after pulling me to the rain shelter.

"I made a super enhanced version of 'Wii Tetsu'. Tetsu-san's movements will be three times his usual speed, and his punch is seven times the original version, so you can rest assured!” What nonsense.

”Ah, that’s right, Major……”

I nearly pulled out the papers that Alice gave me, but I hesitated.

Major should be unclear about Tetsu-senpai’s past as well, especially regarding ‘that matter’…… I wanted to speak of the information that Alice found out, but I just couldn’t do so.

”Hmm? What is it, Vice Admiral Fujishima? What are the papers in your hands?”

”Ah, no, this…… I think it’s better not to—“

”You really don’t need to worry so much. Vice Admiral Fujishima, you can be said to be a martial artist, right? So you must have the determination to use each and every resource to attain victory.”

Who are you calling a martial artist? I wanted to rebuke him, but hesitated, sinking into deep thought in the end.

Things might be as Major had said, this is a fight. Besides, the reason that I started the fight was to expose the truth that Tetsu-senpai wanted to hide in the first place. Even if anything happened in senpai’s past, I probably don’t have the spare time to worry if that matter would be known by Major.

”Erm…… Alice told me something just now……”

I handed the papers about Tetsu-senpai to Major. Major’s expression was unchanged after he looked through it.

”…… Hn hnn? Now I see. This might be a breakthrough.”

”Can you enter this information into the stimulator?”

”Vice Admiral Fujishima truly likes to ask for the impossible, your land troop qualities hasn’t changed at all.”

Major smiled in complacence.

”I will try to finish installing it by tomorrow. This will be the specially upgraded version of ‘Wii Tetsu’. However, you should know that you can only grasp the overall feel with this. As for where Tetsu-san’s blind spot is in reality……”

Major jabbed at my chest.

”It looks like you’ll have to get the feel from the real process.”

I nodded in answer, blocking Major’s third straight punch.

*

The rain did not stop even until the following day.

I could not ride my bike, and added with the fact that I heard that the rain might become heavier and heavier, so I must finish the matters at school ASAP and leave the school, going to the detective agency in advance. The first place that I had to go would be the Inspection office. Among the matters that Alice wanted me to investigate, I asked Kousaka-senpai for her help for the part about the amount management of teaching equipments. After all, the staff probably wouldn’t let me see such a thing even if I went to the Management office.

”Mnn? Eh? What do you want that for?”

As expected, Kousaka-senpai was taken aback because of my request.

”Well…… Actually I’m not sure what it’s for as well.”

”Is it what the girl called Alice asked you to investigate?”

I nodded.

”Though she looks like that, she’s still quite a somewhat skilled detective. I’ll be counting on you.”

”…… It feels like the both of you trust each other very much. A relationship like yours is rather enviable.”

”W- what……!?”

Does it seem like that? Isn’t it more like Alice completely doesn’t need to rely on me?

”That’s because Fujishima-kun is too close with that girl. I can tell in one look.”

They’ve just met for one time, what is she talking about?

”So I’ll trust you guys as well. So it’s just a request for the Management office, right? I’ll think of an excuse.”

”Thank you. Erm…… If you find out about anything, can you fax it to Alice’s place? I have to hurry and leave the school.” After saying that, I passed a note with Alice’s fax number to her.

”Got it. I’ll fax it over as soon as I can, I hope that I can settle it by today.”

”Sorry for giving you trouble.”

”It won’t, as this is my request after all.”

”But……” I stammered, and still spoke in the end. “If we continue to investigate like this, even if we find out the reason of the establishment of the Gardening Club…… Is there a possibility that it would make what the Management is trying to do more justified?”

Kousaka-senpai stayed silent.

Actually, that is quite a plausible possibility. That’s because the club is founded for a certain reason, and was formed through Minagawa Kengo’s connections by talking things over with the Student Council and the teaching staff. The people who want to change the rules would rejoice even if this got out. We might have been doing meaningless things— the cold, empty feeling haunted me.

”That’s okay, we’ll see when that time comes. It just depends on how you use the information, and I will definitely hang on until the last second. We’re now discussing the last part of the amendments with Kaoruko-chan. Even if we can’t protect all of them, I will do my best to let the extant clubs continue.”

This person seems to be tougher than she appears to be……

”However…… Though it’s a bit embarrassing to say this when Fujishima-kun had been doing all of this, but the Gardening Club…… has only two members, so it’s in more danger……” Kousaka-senpai looked rather subdued.

Among the amendments that Kaoruko-senpai suggested, a club must have at least six club members, and Kousaka-senpai is working hard to lower the number. But even if she achieves that, keeping the Gardening Club is next to impossible.

”No, that’s not senpai’s fault……”

I suddenly thought of the matter that I talked over with Hiro-san on the way back from the soapland. The most important thing is not the existence of the Gardening Club, but the flowers in the school.

”Erm…… I’m not sure if this would work, but I thought of something before this.”

After I told Kousaka-senpai what I thought of, a slight radiance illuminated her face.

”…… I see…… Hmm…… It’s not impossible.”

”R- really!?”

”Yes. Compared with what Minagawa-senpai did, this should be much simpler.”

That’s true. Because the method that Minagawa Kengo used was an even more impossibly forced way, and compared with that……

I could only depend on Kousaka-senpai for the rest.

”We must have the support of the teachers for this, and the more the better. I wonder would support this. There isn’t much time left……”

Senpai muttered to herself. It looks like she’s reminding herself of what to do.

”Mnn, this method is worth a try. Shinozaki-san probably doesn’t wish for the Gardening Club to vanish as well, joining a club that she’s uninterested in, right? She probably wishes for the Gardening Club to continue, isn’t that right?”

”…… Hmm?”

Senpai’s words made me think that something was wrong. What did she say just now?

”W- what is it?”

”What did you say just now?”

”Are you referring to Shinozaki-san’s matter? Not wishing for the Gardening Club to vanish?”

”No, not that.”

My expression that time should be rather scary, because senpai looked rather frightened.

”Having to join a club that she doesn’t wish to join…… is that it?”

”Ah……”

All of a sudden, a lot of thoughts that surfaced in my heart joined together. The thing that Kousaka-senpai plans to do, the matter that Kaoruko-senpai is trying to force through, the thing that I am trying to protect— all of them formed a story.

Is this really possible? It’s possible in theory. If that’s it……

”Erm…… I suddenly thought of something……” Kousaka-senpai looked extremely troubled, while I carefully explained in discretion.

“You’re planning to negotiate with Kaoruko-senpai to ask her to lower the lowest number a club must have, right? There might be something that we can do about this, saving the Gardening Club in the process.”

”Wha…… What are your plans?” Kousaka-senpai leaned towards me.

”Instigating the teachers, and it’s best to be the sports teachers. Ah, and the club presidents’ meeting. If so, someone might object to the Student Council.”

After hearing my detailed explanation, Kousaka-senpai stood up in obvious excitement.

”Why don’t we try this? I never thought about this. You’re really something, Fujishima-kun.”

”Do you think it can work? We might get scolded instead……”

”How would you know that it wouldn’t work if you haven’t even tried it? If we start the Student Council’s general meeting in this situation, all of this would be over.”

”That’s— right.”

I suddenly recalled Major’s words— ‘You must have the determination to use each and every resource to attain victory.’

”I think it’s better if I go. Fujishima-kun, it seems that the teacher doesn’t have a good impression of you.”

Those words were spot on, and I could only smile wryly. Senpai rushed out of the Inspection office, leaving through the chaotic corridors, while I watched at the sidelines.

She is now fighting to protect a place belonging to someone, and I need to battle with my own way as well.

The lights in the greenhouse were lit, and could be clearly seen through the rain. It looked just like the gingerbread house in a certain fairy tale.

”Fujishima-kun! So you finally feel like studying? The tests are approaching.”

As soon as I stepped into the greenhouse, Sayuri-sensei who was originally reading some textbooks happily raised her head.

Ayaka just glanced at me, then showed an embarrassed expression without saying anything.

There was always inexplicably confusing thoughts shrouding Ayaka and I. Even when we meet in the classroom or met each other’s gaze in the ramen shop with a counter separating us, neither of us knows what to say. Would just smiling without doing anything or lowering one’s head without saying anything suffice? I really don’t know. Even so, I can’t just avoid going to the greenhouse.

”Erm...... I’m just here to investigate something.”

”Really, you’re playing your detective game again? And you’re even holding such an expensive camera.”

Though I felt guilty in my heart, I still took photos here and there in the greenhouse so that there wouldn’t be anything left out.

”Shinozaki-san, show Mr. Grasshopper who’s just playing around here Miss Ant’s fruits of labor in this test, okay?”

I didn’t even see Ayaka’s reaction to sensei’s words.

There weren’t any flowerpots on the ground. In the past, this place should be full with flowerpots of the poppy flowers used as the raw material of Angel Fix, but since the drug dealing organization moved them away, only the racks by the walls have any flowerpots on it. Therefore, looking through this place thoroughly isn’t that hard.

And the said blood stains couldn’t be seen on the floor at all.

”Sensei, I want to ask something.”

”Hmm? Do you want to study now?”

”Not really. Were there flowerpots or something like that on the ground when you were teaching the people here before this?”

”No. The members of the Gardening Committee didn’t even plant anything here, so that’s why it’s so easy to move tables, the blackboard and so on in here.”

Ah, so things are like this? Then, assuming Hayano Tomohiko really vomited blood and collapsed here, his blood should be on the cement floor— wait, perhaps they might be on the tables? But even so, some blood should still spill onto the ground. Besides, if things really like that, the bloodstained tables should be noticed after that.

Perhaps Alice’s assumptions are wrong?

Anyways, there should be bloodstains somewhere. There weren’t any signs of blood on the snow by the school entrance, so that’s not the place, but somewhere else.

Of course, assuming his blood was left on snow somewhere else, the blood might have seeped into the soil with the melted snow, and we can’t get to know anything more—

All of a sudden, the whole greenhouse sank into darkness. Through the viewfinder of the camera, it was pitch dark in front of me as well. I raised my head in surprise after hearing Ayaka’s cry and could only see the dark rainy skies outside the skylight of the greenhouse. The lights were off. Perhaps it’s just my imagination? The sounds of rainfall were so clear that it was like they were directly pounding on me.

”…… Ahhh, it happened again.”

Sayuri-sensei’s unconcerned tone made people feel even more uneasy, and then she stood up.

”Shinozaki-san, can you help me to support the table?”

”Wh- what is it? A blackout?”

”No, it’s just the lights. It would turn out like that occasionally when it rains.”

Sensei took off her high heeled shoes and jumped onto the table, while I, who was startled into lying down on the ground, hastily distanced myself from the table. Oh please, you’re wearing a skirt right now, other people would see if you’re not careful!

”It’ll brighten after you take this off and shift it a bit…… Ah, that’s right, Fujishima-kun, can you please turn off the circuit breaker? I once tried to fix it without turning it off, some sparks frightened me so much that I almost fell from the table.”

As Sayuri-sensei’s descriptions were rather scary, I hurriedly turned off the circuit breaker, and sensei took down the large light bulb that was like a hanging oil lamp along with its holder. The ceiling of the greenhouse was sleek, crisscrossing metal beams, and there were sprinklers and a box shaped device about the size of a primary school student’s bag installed on it. After hanging the light bulb onto the box, the circuit breaker was turned on once more. When the lights recovered once more, the sounds of the raindrops were gradually lost in the warm glow. Ayaka looked relieved as well and sat down.

”Okay, it’s lit again.” Sensei looked rather triumphant.

”This place…... Feels somewhat like sensei’s house.” I suddenly said.

”Though it’s quite nice having so many flowers here, having no bathroom is somewhat of a hassle.”

As sensei answered in a solemn manner, Ayaka couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

”Would it leak water here?”

I asked while continuing on my work of taking photos. The lights went haywire because of the rainy day, so does that mean the ceiling is damaged?

”Ah— Mnn, this place had already passed its prime, so it wouldn’t be strange even if there are some leaks over here.”

If so, even if Hayano Tomohiko vomited blood and collapsed here, the blood stains might have been washed away because of the water — No no no, what am I talking about? It was snowing that day, and how could the dripping water wash the blood stains away? While going into wild flights of fancy, I took photos of the condition of the ceiling.

To avoid the digital camera from getting wet, I placed it back into my bag after wrapping it with two layers of plastic bags, and planned to leave after making a ‘Sorry’ gesture to Sayuri-sensei.

”Ah, ah, Fujishima-kun.”

Hearing Ayaka’s voice, I turned my head over.

”You’re going to ‘Hanamaru Ramen’, right?”

The pleading expression on Ayaka’s face made her look a few years younger. I nodded in answer.

”Then, then…… I’m going with you!”

Ayaka took her bag and stood up.

”Fujishima-kun, you always bring Shinozaki-san away every time you come. It’s all Fujishima-kun’s fault if the both of you fail your exams.”

Sayuri-sensei teased me half-jokingly, switched off the lights and chivvied us out of the greenhouse.

Ayaka and I held an umbrella each, planning to walk to Hanamaru Ramen slowly. As we couldn’t find anything to say to each other, we walked forward in silence. I was even somewhat thankful for the rainy day, as the sounds of rainfall helped to break our silence. But when we were squeezed into the underpass along with the crowd, the rain started to diminish. There was only a small distance to the building where Hanamaru Ramen is at.

The sounds of rainfall couldn't stop our voices anymore.

"…… Are you still planning to fight with Tetsu-san? Seriously?"

Ayaka finally broke the silence.

"Yeah."

"…… Even if I say that you don't need to do that? It's meaningless to me no matter how the Gardening Club turns out to be."

"Mnn."

I could only answer her weakly.

"Were you like this even before this?"

Ayaka suddenly asked when we were passing by the small path beside the park.

"…… Before this?"

"Eh? Ah, erm……" Ayaka's face reddened slightly before she turned around to look at me from below her umbrella. "I just thought you didn't speak much to me in the past as well."

I couldn't bear to continue to stare at Ayaka's face. I really wish she wouldn't use the comparison of herself before and after she lost her memories to talk to me.

"There's probably not much change. I'm not really much of a talker from before this, and can't find anything to say as well."

Eh, hmm? Why do even I, myself, feel embarrassed after saying that?

"T- then!" Ayaka held her umbrella higher, causing rainwater to splash everywhere. "Then please tell me in the future. If there's anything that you want to say to me, please speak your mind! I will tell you if I have anything to say as well!"

"Ayaka, what are you trying to say……?"

”Aren’t I telling you this right now!?”

Ah, that’s right. I understand. Then— is it my turn? To be honest, it’s hard. As she said before this, shout when I’m angry, laugh when I’m happy, speak out when I want something, I couldn’t do it even though it’s so simple.

”…… It was so hard for me to get that to you, so why don’t you at least wear the armband during club activities?”

I asked as the thought suddenly came to me.

”That thing…… It’s embarrassing for me to wear it alone. Fujishima-san, you’re not wearing it as well, aren’t you?”

”It's embarrassing for me as well, so I don’t feel like wearing it.”

Ayaka furiously emphasized that I was the one who made it, then took out her black armband from her bag and pinned it on her arm with a safety pin.

”I’m wearing it! Is there anything else!?”

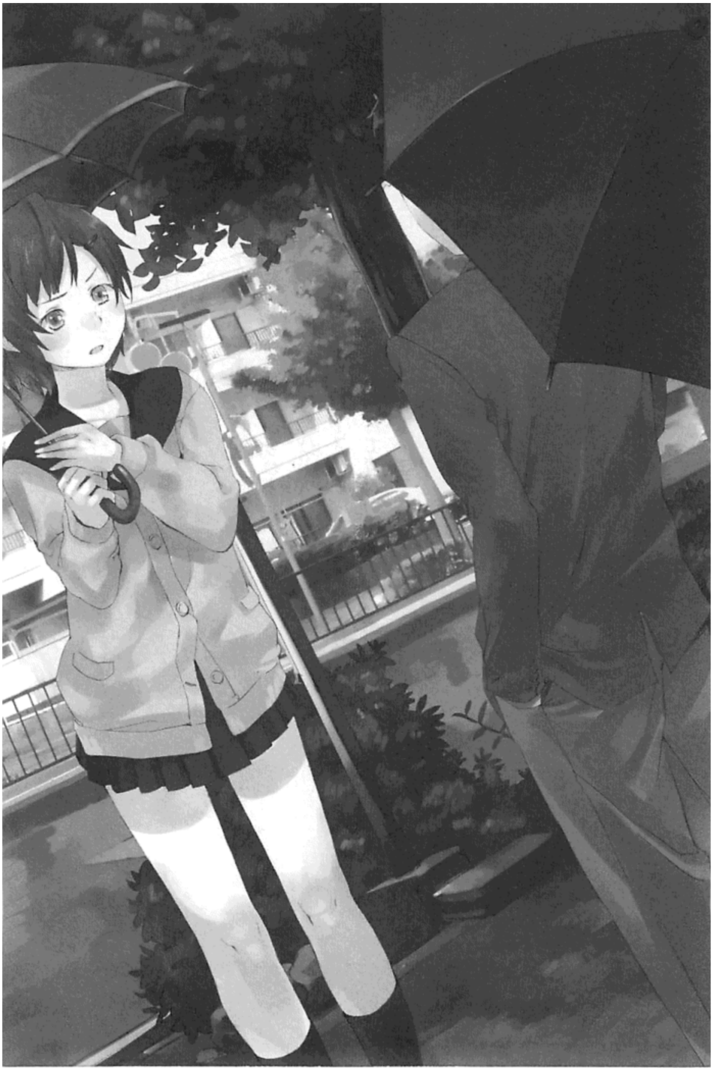
I shut my mouth once again. Actually, there are still a lot of things. For instance, you don’t need to be so polite when talking to me, don’t add a ‘-san’ behind my name and so on. But since these requests felt like I was forcibly pulling Ayaka back to the past, I couldn’t bear to say it.

”What about you, Ayaka? Is there anything else?”

I asked her back in the end. Ayaka looked obviously annoyed, and answered after staying silent for awhile:

”Please don’t get into a fight with Tetsu-san.”

”No. Can I still run away when things have come to this point?”



”Don’t push yourself!”

”You’re the one who’s pushing yourself!” I didn’t think that she could actually be more troublesome than Alice, not giving up even till now.

”I definitely won’t see you!”

After shouting at me, Ayaka bit her lip and stayed silent.

When we reached the front door of the ramen shop, the rain stopped.

”It’s better if the rain can keep falling, so that the rainwater can flush away your plans of fighting.”

Ayaka started to say something like that again, making me stare at the side of the face while thinking of how to refute her. Separated by the closing umbrella, Ayaka’s face was then blocked by the portiere, vanishing into the ramen shop.

As I couldn’t take a step into the shop, I could only walk around to the back alley.

”You’re really bad at using cameras. Can’t you take better photos?”

Alice moved the photos I took into the computer while scolding.

”That’s because it was the first time I used such a large camera…… And also, why do you have so many cameras, Alice? Don’t you just stay in this room?”

”Of course they’re used for taking photos of my good friends.”

Alice pointed at the hill of dolls. Oh, so that’s why…… She doesn’t only cherish these things. With a triumphant expression on her face, Alice even planned to pull out a few GBs of photos out from a file, and I hastily stopped her. Shouldn’t we prioritize our detective work?

”Mnn, that’s right. Then I’ll let you admire my private photo collection next time. Ah, let’s just use these photos as your payment next month, what do you think?”

”I don’t want them, give me cash……”

While scolding my prose personality, mammonism, and desecration of art, Alice turned around to go through the photos of the greenhouse.

”I’m asking you because I trust your observation power. Didn’t you find any blood stains?”

”Mnn…… Of course, there’s a lot of black dirt, but I’m not sure if it’s blood. But indeed, there aren’t any particularly large stains.”

”Hmm, things should be so.”

”What do you mean by things should be so……?”

”If such a thing exists, it would be noticed ages ago when the case happened. I’m just reconfirming the fact.”

”So that means that the place that Hayano Tomohiko collapsed at was not the greenhouse, right?”

”No—“

Originally planning to answer, Alice suddenly stared at one of her monitors without saying a thing. It was a photo that I took of the greenhouse.

”…… What’s with you?”

”What is this thing?”

”What thing……? Ah, that’s—“

I started to explain the things that occurred in the greenhouse. Alice widened her eyes, and narrowed them again.

Suddenly, an electronic sound rang in the room. It was the fax machine on the top layer of the cupboard on our right. One paper after another were expelled from the fax machine, dropping directly onto the bed.

My phone rang.

’Ah, is it Fujishima-kun? I am Kousaka. I finally convinced one of the staff to let me have a look, and I’m faxing them right now. As I’m not sure how much information you need, I’ll just fax all of them there though there’s quite a lot.’

I almost didn’t notice what Kousaka-senpai spoke of, and wasn’t even sure of how I thanked her and hung up.

Alice picked up the stack of fax papers, stood up and stared at the list. For some reason, her expression would make people feel refreshed and full of vigor.

”…… Alice?”

”I understand now.”

The mumblings of the NEET detective spread to me along with the cold wind.

”You understand now?”

”Mnn, I understand almost all of it now.”

Alice raised her head to look at the ceiling. Tens of fax papers dropped from her hands like snowflakes and scattered by her leg.

”The things that Tetsu did, the thing that Hayano Tomohiko wanted to do, and the suspect, all of them are connected now. But regarding Minagawa Kengo— I still don’t understand. He’s obviously connected to the same truth, but I still don’t understand the reason.”

Why did Minagawa Kengo create the Gardening Club? This is the most important truth to me, to Kousaka-senpai and to Ayaka. And it happens that— we can’t know the reason for this?

”He did things alone, not letting the others see it, and vanished silently in a quagmire.”

Alice sat on her bed again. I noticed that the vigor and energy on her face just now was replaced by a damp sorrow, making me feel somewhat short of breath as well.

”Tetsu-senpai must know something. As long as I can defeat him, you’ll be the one to question him, Alice.”

Not only for Ayaka and I, the battle is for this delicate detective as well, that was what I told myself.

Alice rubbed her eyes and furrowed her brows while thinking. Not long after that, she crawled to my side along the blankets, giving me a punch each with both of her hands. It was weak and unenergetic, and it might not even kill a water flea, but it wasn't clear how much words of the deceased were exposed by the hands, and were dirtied by blood because of bogus magic.

"You're still thinking of such dumb things even now? Who would anticipate your opinionated, moronic actions? Whatever, it's best if you regret only when your teeth or bones are broken.

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The day that the current president of the Student Council came to look for me at my class was Monday— the day when I was prepared to have a fight to the death with Tetsu-senpai, and it was right after the bell signifying the end of the fourth period rang.

"Is Fujishima-kun here?"

The slender-bodied, long haired Kaoruko-senpai was standing outside the classroom door, and the class sank into commotion.

"O- o- o- oi, Fujishima! Kaoruko-san is calling you!"

"It seems like Fujishima's misdeeds would have to end here."

"Why don't you pounce on her to hug her before you're killed!"

Shut up. And also, don't tail me!

It felt as though the air by Kaoruko-senpai's side was electrified, it could obviously be seen that she was tremendously furious. After a 'Please come over here!', I was brought to the corner of a staircase.

"…… I- is there anything wrong?"

There were countless matters that could make her angry that I could think of, so I had no idea how I annoyed her……

”Ushijima-sensei discussed some matters with me just now. It’s about the amendment of the rules.”

Isn’t Ujishima-sensei the boss of the sports teachers? It has been said that he once took the second place in the Judo event of the National Games.

”I really don’t understand why he only has something to say now. He even said that he’s going to discuss the details with me after school. However, it seems that you’ve done something according to Kousaka.”

”Ah, ahhhhh, y- yes.”

Why didn’t Kousaka-senpai explain things herself……?

”And the club presidents were informed of an emergency meeting as well. You’re probably the instigator, isn’t that right?”

Saying that I’m the instigator might be too over, but the initiator was indeed me. So how should I explain this now? Judging from Kaoruko-senpai’s gaze, it seems that she indeed wants to beat me up. Oh well, even if I ignore her now, I would be beaten to death by Tetsu-senpai in the evening anyways.

”I asked Kousaka-senpai to go the sports teachers’ office, and it’s the same for the club presidents’ meeting. That means, I asked her to explain how much trouble it might bring if the Management’s proposal of the amendment of rules is accepted.”

”What trouble would it bring to the teachers?”

As Kaoruko-senpai kept getting closer to me, I was forced to lean against the wall.

”Isn’t there a rule in our school that every student must join at least one club? According to your amendment proposal, the existing clubs with five members or less will be abolished. If so, about eighty club refugees would appear! Though putting it like that isn’t that nice, that’s the whole truth.”

Kaoruko-senpai wore an expression as though she was stabbed, showing that she probably didn’t think about that situation— most people doesn’t know that the weeds that they are stepping on have names as well, but the weeds still bloom during the spring.

”After that, the eighty people will join the other large clubs. Using sports clubs as an example, they might accept a crowd of new members who don’t concentrate on practices. Wouldn’t this bring trouble to the sports teachers acting as the adviser or the coach? That’s why the club president meeting cannot put this aside as well.”

”Ah……”

I don’t know if it will turn out like that in reality, though there is a possibility, so much of what I have said was just improvised. But that’s the only weapon that I have, and this weapon seems to be quite effective on the sports teachers.

Should I continue to speak? Though I hesitated, I still spoke in the end:

”Everyone probably wants a place that belongs to themselves, right? They probably hope to be able to at least choose a club that they’re interested in. Nobody will be happy if they’re forced to join a club that they’re uninterested in.”

Unexpectedly, Kaoruko-senpai actually leaned against the wall by my side, sinking into deep thought while covering her mouth.

”That’s right…… But……”

I originally thought that I would be strongly rebuked. Is she really thinking things over properly?

”…… Even so.” Kaoruko-senpai seemed rather helpless. “The Accounting division of the Management definitely won’t stand for this. And this problem arose because of the unfair budget in the first place. Now—“

”That’s why I’m telling you—”

I bit my lip, and hesitated whether I should continue to speak. This is the second best plan. Moreover, things can't be turned back anymore if I fail now.

Even so, there's probably no ways other than this.

”Lower the minimum number club members to about four…… Kousaka-senpai said that this might be better as well. If you do that, over half of the clubs would avoid abolishment, but as senpai wishes for, the Gardening Club will still be abolished. Though it isn't that nice phrasing it like this, but we're willing to be the scapegoat who convinces the others during the Student Council general meeting.”

Kaoruko-senpai furrowed her brows.

”Why? Didn't you put in a lot of effort running here and there so that the Gardening Club would not be abolished?”

I shook my head.

”Actually, the club isn't that important.”

The thing that I wanted to protect is the place that belongs to Ayaka.

”I wish to restore the Gardening Committee.”

Kaoruko-senpai nearly cried out loud, while I continued my explanation to prevent her from shouting:

”Because things should be like this in the first place. Since this concerns the facilities of the school, shouldn't the school use its own resources? It's because some people wants to forcibly abolish it, while some other people wants to maintain it that abnormal budgets like this would appear. So why don't we return it to its original state? And there shouldn't be anything wrong with a Gardening Committee—“

I stopped. It seemed like the blazing flames of fury in Kaoruko-senpai would liquefy, spilling out at any moment.

”Restoring the Gardening Committee? Something like this……

You’re actually telling me to agree to this!?”

”I’ve asked Kousaka-senpai about this already. If it can work, as long as the Student Council agrees to it, I think the staff probably —“

”Stop messing with me!”

Kaoruko-senpai banged the wall forcefully, it’s a good thing that there is next to no one who walks around the stairs at the edge of the school building. I never thought that she would be that angry.

”You— didn’t you find out a lot of things? Even though you know everything, you’re still giving me such a request?”

”Then……” I’m a really cruel person. While thinking of that, I spoke out the truth that I learnt ages ago: “Senpai, you truly wish to abolish the Gardening Club because of personal vengeance, don’t you?”

Kaoruko-senpai glared at me with her eyes full of tears.

”…… That’s right, you’re absolutely right. Can’t I even do that? Those people are the ones who caused Tomohiko to die in the first place! The person called Minagawa is definitely involved in this! Tomohiko always mentioned his name. He was really so stupid, believing that those people were his friends even though he was bullied……!”

”Wait, please wait a minute!”

I interrupted Kaoruko’s declaration that was like hot molten metal.

”Had your brother ever mentioned Tetsu-senpai— Ichinomiya Tetsuo?”

”He often mentioned that person, saying that he’s friendly with him, but how could that be possible? Tomohiko was rather unhealthy, and he didn’t have many friends at school, so that’s why……”

”Tetsu-senpai, he……”

Our voices interweaved in the air, turning garbled.

”I’m thinking that senpai really was your brother’s friend.”

”What are you talking abo—“

I slammed my palm beside Kaoruko-senpai’s face with a bang as she was trying to interject.

”The reason that Tetsu-senpai chose to drop out was definitely not because he caused Tomohiko-senpai to die. He has other reasons. I have no concrete evidence right now, so I can’t say anything about this right now, but—“

”What are you trying to say?”

”But I’m going to prove this right now!”

I clenched my fists while standing in front of Kaoruko-senpai. Those words were actually for myself. If I don’t say that, I’m afraid that I wouldn’t have the courage to face things.

I must now beat Tetsu-senpai up— and then prove his innocence.

Kaoruko-senpai pushed my arm away with her face red and ran towards the stairs, turning around to say along the way: ‘Whatever, idiot!’ Not long after that, senpai’s footsteps vanished in the corridors.

I continued to support myself on the wall with my palm, opening my fists to take a look for awhile, and tightly clenched it once more.

*

On the level of building below the Hirasaka-gumi’s office was a large ceremonial hall with wooden floorboards. I once entered this place before this, as it was the place where Yondaime and I underwent the sake ceremony.

On the big day, a large tatami mat was spread at the center of the ceremonial hall, while candles and scrolls of Hachiman Great

Bodhisattva were hung in the restroom. A crowd of men in black T-shirts were kneeling around the place with their hands on their knees. Just by entering from the steel door, it made me feel my will of battle start to dissipate.

”Aniki, thanks for your hard work!”

”Thanks for your hard work!”

Oh please, can’t there be less people here?

”Tetsu isn’t here as well.”

Yondaime spoke while standing by my side. As the witness, Yondaime was garbed completely in white— a white jacket and trousers, but it was different from the feel of Hiro-san in white— he was like a grim reaper.

”Erm…… You don’t need to make things this big, do you……”

”But there’s no other place that can let people fight until they’re hurt.”

That’s not wrong, but…… Well, this place is spacious enough. But do they have to invite such a large audience?

”Aniki, we’re counting on you today!”

”I’ve bet ten thousand yen!”

Rough voices came from the surroundings. I’m not sure if it was because news of Hiro-san and Major giving me special training got out, but it seems like people started to bet on me as well. Or maybe it was because the odds on Tetsu-senpai were too low? Since this caused the number of people betting on me to increase drastically, it raised the odds on the people supporting Tetsu-senpai instead. I really don’t have the courage to ask about the final odds……

”I’m getting this clear first. When should I stop you two? For instance, how many times you’re beaten down? Or if a large impact hits the head—“

”Please don’t stop us.”

I stared at the corner of Yondaime’s mouth, answering determinedly. Seeing his gaze that had the sharpness of a wolf, I suddenly got weak again.

”That’s true, it’s a waste of effort. This is a fight after all.”

Yondaime turned over to face the restroom, the scroll of Trilokavijaya [1] behind his jacket looking as though it was glaring at me.

”Then let it be a fight to the finish.”

I nodded in answer.

When Tetsu-senpai arrived at the scene, I was wrapping the bandages onto my fists.

”Oh— it seems that quite a lot of people gathered here.”

As usual, senpai was wearing a T-shirt, but a set of red boxing gloves were hung on his shoulders. His looked rather casual as though he was just here to do some fishing, and he looked around the whole ceremonial hall.

”Ojiki, thanks for your hard work!”

”Thanks for your hard work!”

All of the members bowed at the same time.

”Hmm? Why is Narumi wearing gloves?”

Tetsu-senpai asked after looking at the coffee-colored gloves that I was about to wear.

”Aren’t we going to box?”

”Senpai, didn’t you bring gloves as well?”

”Oh, this one?” Senpai patted the gloves made of synthetic leather that was hung on his shoulders while saying: “From before this, I didn’t dare to use my full power when fighting, as I might really kill someone if I use my fists to hit directly. The gloves—“

Senpai stopped for awhile, and looked downwards at my fists, his gaze full of loneliness.

”Are worn for me to fight the opponent with all my strength.”

It’s over…… My knees started to tremble. I tried hard to refrain the terror surging from my heart.

”So that’s why…… I’m not here to box as well. This is one of my battle strategies.”

”Is that so.”

After that, the two of us did not speak anymore.

The next person who walked in was Major, who was carrying a tripod and a video recorder on his shoulders.

”Sorry for the wait, we’re about to start soon.”

”Isn’t Hiro coming?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

”Hiro-san is at Hanamaru Ramen right now. He’s going to bring Ayaka over if she changes her mind. But I think that it would probably be too late by then, isn’t that right?”

Ayaka.

As the day of my fight with Tetsu-senpai approached, Ayaka wasn’t even willing to speak to me anymore. And she especially emphasized that she wouldn’t come and see me……

Alice wasn’t at the scene as well, probably because she thinks that I don’t have a chance of winning?

That’s fine with me as well. This isn’t a scene that I want them to see. Tetsu-senpai was willing to come, while I did not choose to run away as well. Just because of this, the last possibilities had already joined together.

”Let’s start.”

After saying that, Tetsu-senpai turned around, using his fist to punch the other, giving out a ‘thud’ sound, so that his gloves would fit more. While Yondaime stood in front of the altar—

”There’s no starting gong, you idiots can start if you want to.”

Those words signified the starting gong.

I had just raised my hands to my chin position when Tetsu-senpai approached in an extremely low posture in a flash. It was all thanks to the reflex I trained out using Major’s stretching machine, or my defenses would probably be broken immediately, hitting my chin. A large impact then came from my front, and I felt that my hands almost broke. My whole body was knocked backwards, the friction caused between my back and the tatami mat was burning hot.

I didn’t see anything! Did he really punch me? He wouldn’t have rammed into me with his body, would he! As I was trying to stand up to maintain distance, a large shadow was already shrouded over me.

I was forced to raise my elbows to block the rapid fire bombardment of shells, but the impact still spread to the side of my abdomen in the end.

It burns! It was as though the position that was hit almost drifted out of my body. Calm down, remember to use the eyes to catch the opponent’s silhouette, I have no other weapons other than this.

”Aniki, stop acting like a turtle and attack!”

”Beat him up directly, Ojiki!”

I heard the cries of the irresponsible members from afar.

A shadow suddenly dashed into my field of vision. I hurriedly raised my hands and extended it forward slightly. The first thing that the muscled shop owner taught me was that keeping my hands closely pressed to my body in self defense because of fear would only cause the death sentence to become earlier. That’s because the damage by the opponent would be more than expected, and it would also cause myself to lose the sense of distance with the opponent.

That means— don't use the hands as armor, but an obstacle.

Ka-bam. There was a chilling ring as the shells that were shot at me squeezed through my arm in an attack. I see it! At the instant when I thought that, the right part of my vision was already dyed with a red color along with a charred smell. My ears started to ring along with the shouts of the surrounding people, and I felt a pain spreading to my teeth after a moment. I nearly kneeled down right then.

The next punch hit my head. No, shouldn't it have grazed the corner of my eyes? I wasn't sure of how serious my injuries were, I only knew that I couldn't stand up so steadily any more.

However—

Between my hands, senpai's silhouette could now be seen clearly. I see it! I brushed off the next wave of attack with the back of my hand, and I suddenly launched my first wave of attacks from the right. Thud! Tetsu-senpai easily blocked my attack, and launched a kick at my abdomen— that's right, a forceful kick! That's because we're not boxing right now. I rapidly went backwards, evading the counter attack.

"Oh? So you only learnt how to defend?"

Tetsu-senpai shrugged.

"I've learnt another secret technique as well."

After hearing my words, Tetsu-senpai raised his brows slightly. Is he thinking that I'm bluffing? Whatever. In reality, I only have a tiny chance of victory in the first place, it's better for me if the opponent believes that. As Major said, in this battle, even if I'm badly beaten up, I still have to search for something— Tetsu-senpai's blind spot.

Senpai's upper torso started to move left and right. The rhythm of him twisting around corroded my pulse step by step.

He’s coming! When I realized it, senpai’s face was already by my side. I rapidly squatted down, while senpai’s elbow attack grazed past the hair on the back of my head like a sickle. So he planned to use his elbow to attack my head. While rolling on the tatami mat, I felt as though an ice block of terror was stuffed into my stomach. I was too naive, this person really planned to kill me.

As I was about to stand up, my lower abdomen was hit by a certain object.

”— Cough!”

I could heard my own moaning along with the sound of the bloody saliva being spat out of my own mouth. Tetsu-senpai’s kick was so forceful that I almost sprang up from the tatami mat.

”What are you lying down for! Hurry up and stand, it’s hard for me to beat you up like this.”

Tetsu-senpai’s shouts descended on me like acid rain, burning into my ears. I pressed one of my hands on my abdomen while using the other to support my body. My chin was trembling…… This is bad! My whole body is shuddering. Whenever I saw Tetsu-senpai coldly rolling his eyes, I would give off a hiccup from my throat, my body going backwards by itself.

Is this person really Tetsu-senpai?

My thoughts were just too naive. Thinking that this is just a fight between kids, thinking that he isn’t a person to hate. I tried to cease those thoughts, but they still remained in a corner somewhere in my heart. I remember that Tetsu-senpai once said, if you imagine that the opponent would be hurt, we can’t attack the others. Now, I could fully understand the meaning of those words. In the process of fighting, the thing that is most required is the lack of a certain imagination.

I couldn’t do it at all.

”H- hey, Aniki is in trouble.”

”His eyes are already dead.”

Unknowingly, the applause of the audience couldn't be heard anymore, and what took its place were murmurs. It's noisy, shut up! I'm the clearest about this!

Tetsu-senpai approached with a completely unguarded posture. He knew that it would strike the most terror in people's heart. I kept going backwards to the edge of the tatami mat, almost falling down, and was soon forced to a corner. Senpai raised his gloves…… I'll get caught! I reflexively pushed away his hand, and at that moment, something pounded onto my unguarded face. My world turned utterly white in a flash, only my consciousness was still wavering, and when it returned to my flesh once more, I was already sliding slowly onto the floor with my back to the walls. Something warm seeped out of my injured forehead, flowing down at the two sides of my nose. Though it did hurt, it didn't feel as though it was my own. So I was hit on the head…… I could actually think so in an abnormal calmness.

On the next second, Tetsu-senpai's finger stabbed between my rib bones.

"— *Cough*! *Hack*!"

I collapsed while vomiting blood. A second, a third, it felt like my innards were directly kicked at. My vision blurring because of blood, I frantically tried not to faint, thinking of a way to grab— to grab Tetsu-senpai's leg.

"Stop that!"

My neck was hit with an attack that was like a scimitar, while my body collapsed onto the floor directly because of the attack. I just feel that it really isn't simple for my head and my body to stay connected right until now.

"Oi, Narumi, you're already done? You're the one who asked for a fight, and you're planning to just take a nap after being beaten senseless? If you don't say anything, I'll trample on your ribs until they break!"

I suddenly thought that it might be fine like that as well. I suppressed the pain in my whole body and tossed them aside, continuing to lie down with my teeth clenched. Never mind if he wants to break any bone, I don't want to fight anymore! I can't stand up anymore!

My back was assaulted with a blow that was like blocks of steel, while the air that I spat out had a rusty feel to it.

"Vice Admiral Fujishima! Oi, Tetsu-san! Aren't you hitting a bit too hard!"

I heard Major's shouts. When I opened my swollen eyes, a small silhouette was about to rush over to my side, but was stopped by the tall person garbed in white standing behind him— Yondaime.

That's right, the person who asked him not to stop the match no matter what was me.

The following blow hit the side of my abdomen. Pain seeped into my spine. I rolled on the floor, thinking of a way to roll back to the center of the hall where the tatami mat was spread. When I heard footsteps once more, I stood up in a defensive stance with both my fists clenched, as though I was pulled upwards by an invisible spring.

"…… Ugh."

Because of my swollen eyes, my field of vision was less than half of my usual, while Tetsu-senpai who was only one step away from me looked rather surprised.

"So you can still fight? Narumi, I never knew that you're a guy with so much spunk."

Senpai raised his hands once more as well, recovering his expression of a boxer.

"Is there a need to do this? Why do we have to do such an idiot thing?"

I started with a jab with my left hand, and followed up with a right uppercut, treating it as a replacement for the answer. At the instant when senpai leaned backwards slightly, successfully evading my attack, a tremendous force assaulted me with a ‘bam’, and something warm spurted out. I jumped backwards, the kneecap of one of my legs feeling as though it was going to break. So I was instantly countered. Blood trailed continuously from my nose, dripping onto the tatami mat.

”…… Because senpai is so strong.”

”I don’t get it!”

I was suddenly aware of the silence in the ceremonial hall. Except for Major who was struggling while being pressed down by Yondaime, nobody dared to move except for senpai and I, and nobody dared to speak half a word as well.

”You’re obviously so strong, but why did you give up on boxing? Why are you playing pachinko?”

I once again asked the question to which I already knew the answer for, while senpai’s expression changed slightly.

”Even if I don’t continue to box, nobody would feel troubled at all. But if I don’t play with the steel marbles, I would feel very troubled.”

Senpai showed a shallow smile. On the other hand, I continued to go forward, stubbornly assaulting him with jabs and uppercuts. Facing senpai’s steel-like defense, my attack was obviously negligible.

I think that he’s lying. There’s probably someone who feels sad because he isn’t boxing anymore. Right, right. Continuously repeating the movement of going forward and backward, one time after another, aiming at the same spot, I could only use the only boxing skill that I knew of. Not knowing how many times I went forward for, my leg at the front suddenly experienced a huge pressure like that of a guillotine and nearly sank into the tatami mat. It was stomped on! I couldn’t escape…… Everything is too late! Senpai’s elbow was highly raised—

Bright red.

The ceiling slowly swirled in my vision.

I did fall down on my back, the back of my head should have banged on the tatami mat, but I almost couldn’t feel anything. Only a lethargic feeling was present. Where have my hands and legs run off to? Indeed, I still can’t do it, it seems like I can’t stand anymore. I probably did quite well already, didn’t I? It had just been two weeks…… I underwent the hellish training of cleaning and spring machine, but still failed. For what purpose am I getting beaten up for? What would I lose if I give up here? It feels like all of those don’t matter anymore. The aches and pain everywhere in my body surfaced one after another, the blood dripping down seemed that they’re about to trickle into my eyes soon. Now, if I would just go along with the flow and pass out, I can easily—

In my upside down vision, the silver-gray metal door was suddenly opened, the rays of light outside piercing my eyes. As I was planning to close my eyes, I saw a silhouette whose long hair was whirled upwards by the wind in the opposing light.

”— Narumi!”

The girl’s voice resounded in the hall. My consciousness blurred, my heart thinking: Is she still wearing pajamas because she rushed outdoors too quickly? I could faintly feel Alice running over here.

”Alice, no!”

A long arm tightly held Alice from the back. It was Hiro-san. He pressed his hands on Alice’s shoulders, half of his body already in the hall.

”I’m telling you that you can’t do it! They’re fighting!”

That’s right, don’t bother us…… I’m going to get trampled to death by Tetsu-senpai right now. Pain that was as though I was pierced by a scorching iron rod came from the side of my abdomen. I cried in pain, rolling on the tatami mat while vomiting blood and saliva. Tetsu-senpai stood by my side.

”Tetsu! Just try it! Continue to hurt Narumi and I'll break up all relationships with you!”

Alice screamed in Hiro-san's arms.

”Whatever. We're having a fight right now, stop meddling……”

I heard the chilling words that came from Tetsu-senpai, and the energy in my whole body trickled out from my hands and feet. It's probably ending soon, right? How many more kicks would suffice? I was planning to close my eyes yet again, and at that moment—

”Narumi, you huge idiot! Are you trying to take away a good friend and assistant from my side once more!? If you dare to do such a thing, I won't ever forgive you! Even if it's in my next life or the next, I will never forgive you!”

Alice's words surged through my whole body like an electric shock.

When I sprang up yet again, Tetsu-senpai's foot stepped on nothingness. I rolled away on the tatami mat to maintain distance. It felt like almost all of the muscles in my body were going to peel away from my bones, but I still gritted my teeth and stood up.

That's right, I must beat him up. Using the ability trained out by the spring training caused myself to make a battle stance once more. Once again, I fought to reclaim that place. Using my fists to confirm Tetsu-senpai's kindness.

I spat out my saliva that was mixed with fresh blood onto the tatami mat. Tetsu-senpai approached while crouching. Just crossing my arms to block assaults from below caused my bones to scream for help, even my feet left the floor slightly. The two of us entangled and almost fell down, then there was immediately another jab. I frantically evaded it and used my shoulder to block the attack, and it felt like my joints were smashed to pieces. But that was my left shoulder. Just my right hand would be okay, it's okay if I could lash out with a punch with my right hand. My scratched cheek was spurting blood. I forcefully stamped on senpai's thigh, causing the muscled upper torso to shake slightly. I continued to lash out with my left hand that had almost no energy left. My assault was like a balloon waving in the wind. After easily blocking the attacking with the back of his hand, he planned to directly use his right fist to hit my face.

Now!

I crouched down, curving my upper torso in an almost couching angle. Senpai's counterattack brushed past my face and shaved off a layer of skin, but my right hand waved by itself at that moment.

The emptiness in Tetsu-senpai's vision— I can clearly see his blind spot!

The blow that I lashed out diagonally upwards at the same moment when I fell down to the floor was neither powerful nor speedy, and it was my last attack. People could probably evade it no matter who it is— even if it were to be me, I probably could look while evading the weak punch.

However, Tetsu-senpai did not see it.

My fists reached the sturdy chin directly. I straightened my arm as well, and with a 'thud', an indescribable sense of invigoration was spread to the back of my head. Though my eyes were wide open, I couldn't see Tetsu-senpai's silhouette, there were only shadows and a blood red color. Something suddenly pounced on me. So heavy! I was nearly squashed to death. I frantically struggled to free myself from that thing, and I only understood when I felt something falling on the surface of the floor by my foot—

Along with the headache and the serious ringing in my ears, I just stood at a side while looking at that thing. At that moment, I even thought that my soul was out of my body, looking at myself collapsed on the floor. But there was still the hot breathing belonging to me in my throat, and there was indeed the painful feeling on my kneecaps that had almost fractured that belonged to me as well.

The person who was lying by my foot was not me, but Tetsu-senpai.

How is that possible?

Such a thought suddenly arose, but of course that was because my fist crushed Tetsu-senpai's chin. I felt like blood almost spurted out from my ears and my eyes, if I breathe in gently, the bones and muscles in my body seemed like they would burn up. Accompanied by my foggy consciousness and the aches consuming my whole body, I only raised my head slightly after a lot of effort, using only my eyes to look around. The first thing to enter my field of vision was Alice whose face was damp with tears and was running over to me, and then there were the numerous black shirted men who sprang up almost at the same time, the shrugging Yondaime, and also Hiro-san and Major who were holding each other's hands tightly.

Where is this place? I pondered at the center of the world that was starting to blur.

Should I really stay at this place? Why do I feel like this battle hasn't ended yet?

However, it seems like—

I've won…… Kind of.

Not earning anything, and not protecting anything.

It's just that I've once again reconfirmed the truth that I knew from the start. Even so……

So that means I can probably lie down now, right? With my feet trembling non-stop, my eyelids unbelievably heavy, my face burned as though it was swollen to twice its size, and I couldn't breathe because of the blood blocking my nose as well.

A certain petite body hugged my leg. I slid my fingers among the silky hair, leaning onto the person's body and curved my knees to sit on the floor, collapsing onto the floor in the end.

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I stood on the rooftop of the school, a concrete floor before my eyes, while the limitless evening sky of the winter reigned at the other side of the short wall. Long-headed poppies that had not bloomed grew in the seams between the tiles, their pale green stems and leaves swaying in the bone-chillingly bitter wind.

There was a warmth by my side, it was Ayaka. She curved her knees and sat by my side, coincidentally touching my arm while putting on her armband on her arm.

”Fujishima-kun, I might be even clumsier and more useless than you. To be honest, I’m really thankful for you, but maybe you don’t really feel it. So, when spring arrives—“

Ahhh, this is— this dream is……

The words that Ayaka did not finish that day.

Just before she jumped off the building, the last day that we underwent club activities while wearing the armband together.

”When spring arrives?”

The question that I could not ask that day. If it’s just a dream, I should probably ask this bravely.

”Yes. When spring arrives, we must speak of the words hidden in each other’s ‘stomachs’.”

”Shouldn’t it be in our ‘hearts’?”

”Mnn, eh?”

Ayaka looked at me while smiling.

”I have to put it in my stomach because my breasts aren’t large enough.”

No no no, Ayaka probably wouldn’t say such tasteless words. Please be more dignified, my dream.

”After that, speak your words clearly and build normal interpersonal relationships.”

Ayaka stuck out her index finger, saying in a mischievous tone.

”But if you say that, doesn’t it feel like my relationships right now are rather abnormal?”

”Aren’t they abnormal from the start?”

Ayaka hugged her knees while leaning against the wall.

”Fujishima-kun, you probably don’t know what I think about you until now, isn’t that right? It’s the same for me. But since we’re so close to each other, this is really strange.”

Is that so? Even if it were to be Alice and I or with Tetsu-senpai and the other, it feels something like that as well.

Ah, but it might be slightly different with Ayaka. That’s because we began with Ayaka clearly speaking out her request and looking for me. If that’s so, I can……

”— I can speak it out as well.”

”Eh?”

”I can speak it out even if spring hasn’t come yet. If it were to be now……”

Because I defeated Tetsu-senpai. Before this, Alice and Ayaka kept worrying about me, were angry at me, didn’t want to care about me, but I am still alive. So the me right now can speak it out.

”I had only Ayaka as a friend before this. If it wasn’t because of Ayaka giving me a hand, I might still be alone. I was really lonely when Ayaka got angry at me and nearly disappeared. And actually, when you disappeared, it was like I was only an empty shell left. I couldn’t believe that I could actually have such a feeling as well.”

Wow, I actually dare to say anything. It’s better if I can tell the Ayaka right now about this when I wake up too.

”— I’m happy…… to have met you, Ayaka.”

My words disappeared, being taken away by the glass-like winter skies.

After some time of silence, Ayaka sighed.

”…… That’s all?”

”Eh? Mnn, erm……”

I looked at Ayaka who looked slightly lonely. The Ayaka right now felt rather unfamiliar to me all of a sudden, it felt somewhat off somewhere. It seemed like something doesn’t match the Ayaka in my memories, but where?”

”However, I just think that you’re always angry at me.”

”There’s no such thing……”

I swallowed the words that I half-said. Unknowingly, the setting sun of winter disappeared, pitch-black darkness surrounding us. There wasn’t a hint of happiness on the side of Ayaka’s face anymore.

”You should honestly tell me for what reason you’re angry for, but you pretend not to care every time, that’s why I’m sad. I’m even unclear of how to handle everything anymore……”

”Aren’t you the one who pretends not to care!?” I couldn’t help but cry out loud. “Why did you leave without telling anyone? You could try to say something to me! Actually jumping down alone like that…… Go……”

I thought in my heart: ‘Don’t say anymore!’, the scratches on my face hurt because of my own voice.

”Sorry……”

Ayaka’s face sank into darkness. It was not the rooftop under the setting sun anymore, but a small, cramped, and dark room somewhere. The hesitation that was unique to Ayaka who lost her memories filled her eyes.

”…… I don’t remember anymore. I- I’m probably just caring about myself……"

Her answer was rather heartrending. Why did I ask her such a question? And that was also the final mystery that bound me at a dark corner, connecting Alice to this case.

But something like this— it doesn't matter now, does it? The most important thing is, Ayaka is still here right now.

"But whenever the me right now talks to you, you would look mournful."

"That's…… irrelevant to the Ayaka before this. It's just that you always add a '-san' when talking to me, and act all polite, everyone would feel like that no matter who…… Ahhhh, forget it. All of this doesn't matter now, anyways……"

"How can that be……" Why can't we just speak out the thoughts in our hearts frankly? "Ayaka, you don't have to try to do anything for me. Because you're already back here, that's enough."

"But!"

Ayaka finally raised her head, glittering beads of water flying in the air.

"But I……"

The words after that started to blur, my back and my abdomen started to ache faintly, and I suddenly felt a coldness as though I was thrown into a pool of water, while I was plunged into darkness once more—

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When I opened my eyes, a coffee colored fluffy thing was blocking my sight.

"Guwagh!"

When I tried to push the thing away, bouts of pain immediately came from everywhere on my body, I could only sigh and relax.

”Look, he’s awake! Lyril’s power is indeed great!”

Alice sat by my side, shouting while jumping. Don’t jump anymore, my wounds hurt!

I only raised my head slightly, but I felt like my skin was about to crack to my back, an unbearable pain; it took me quite some effort before I was aware that I was lying on a bed. Alice sat by my side, and kept trying press the medium-sized teddy bear onto my face. What on earth are you trying to do!

Alice looked at me in elation:

”Yondaime used his fastest elbow attack, Hiro let you drink the lotion that’s best for the caring for the skin, while Major used the electric charge of a military stun gun. Everyone tried to use their own way to awaken you, but only my Lyril is the most effective in the end, so you have to thank me properly.”

”Are you people trying to kill me!?”

I sat up forcibly. Full of short bookshelves and cardboard boxes, it was a room full of dust. So it was the study in Hirasaka-gumi. Yondaime sat by the computer table behind Alice, Hiro-san sat at the stacked together cardboard boxes, while Major sat on a solitary cardboard box. And also—

Tetsu-senpai sat on the short shelf with wheels on it by the entrance.

”Though you won, you’re even more badly beaten up.”

I could tell that Tetsu-senpai’s tone was rather bitter, while Major laughed in secret at a side.

”Ah, no, it’s still fine……”

I looked at my own body. My shirt was probably taken off because of being torn and bloodstained, and I could see my arms and chest that were bandaged and stuck full of plasters.

I looked around the room once again, but Ayaka's silhouette couldn't be seen. That's right, it was only a dream. But each and every word that Ayaka said was abnormally realistic. She was already very angry when she heard that I was going to have a fight with Tetsu-senpai, so of course she isn't going to appear here right now.

I— really defeated Tetsu-senpai?

Victory. Is it true? I really couldn't be sure.

"You won."

Yondaime didn't seem quite happy.

"Gardening Club kid, you've been waiting for that chance from the start, haven't you? What kind of bad uppercut is that? Were you gauging the distance with your first punches?"

"Ah, n- no……"

I looked at my right hand that still felt rather numb.

"I wasn't gauging the distance, but the location and the angle."

Yondaime raised one of his brows, turning around to look at Tetsu-senpai.

"So you knew it all along?" Tetsu-senpai said in bitterness. "Ahhh, I understand now. Alice found out about it, didn't she? Seriously…… I think you probably dug out even the medical report that you can't understand, didn't you?"

"Tetsu, it's better not to discuss this here—"

"Whatever, it's okay even if people know about this." Tetsu-senpai stopped Alice from continuing to speak. My heart ached somewhat.

"…… Your eyes, do they have some kind of problem?"

Yondaime inquired. I turned around in surprise, he knows about this? Just looking at the match……

”Is there anything not to know? He couldn’t even dodge a weak attack like that, is there any other reason?”

”That’s right.”

Tetsu-senpai supported his elbows on his thighs, looking at the floor with his palms pressed together:

”It’s glaucoma. A part of my visual nerves was severed, so I can’t see in a certain range.”

That’s right, that was Tetsu-senpai’s blind spot that Alice found out about. Glaucoma. Because of damage in the visual nerves, as he explained just now, an obstacle that caused the blind spot in our eyes to spread.

”So the coffee-colored gloves were used for this?”

Yondaime’s voice was full of helplessness, and I could only nod weakly in answer.

Actually it was a color for camouflage. I knew long ago that the battle would be done in that dark room with wooden floorboards, the coffee-colored gloves were used to let my fists blend in with the colors of the walls and the floorboards. Of course, doing this is meaningless on other people. But to Tetsu-senpai’s sick eyes—

”…… I’m sorry.”

The words popped out unknowingly from my mouth. Senpai smiled ironically.

”Why are you apologizing? I don’t mind it much.”

But I used senpai’s weakness, and even told Major about this.

I was beaten up and trampled by Tetsu-senpai, even if I crawled here and there, I still continued to lash out with a right uppercut, searching for that ‘spot’— the angle where senpai’s reactions slowed, when the movement of his eyes were abnormal.

Only this was the reason that senpai lost.

And this— was the reason that Tetsu-senpai had to give up on boxing.

So I have to continue to torment senpai about his hurt eyes. That's because I battled just for this.

To convert the truth that I knew long ago into facts.

”…… The time when the doctors told you about this was probably October four years ago, isn't that right?”

A bout of pain came on me when I questioned senpai, I think it's not only a pain from the wound in my mouth.

”Probably.”

”Deciding to give up on boxing, and then requesting to drop out from school…… And the request was denied by the boxer that you treat as a father, it should be around October as well, isn't that right?”

”So what?”

”Actually, senpai, long before Hayano Tomohiko fell into that accident— you wanted to leave school.”

It was a truth that I confirmed with my own fists.

The person who pulled senpai out of a dark swamp and encouraged him to continue to high school was the owner of the boxing hall. When the bridge that connected the two was lost— boxing, senpai chose to leave. Leaving from the boxing hall, leaving from school.

”That should be how things are, isn't that right? Everyone thought that you dropped out because of causing Hayano Tomohiko to die, but long before that, senpai already……”

”So what?”

”So I'm saying that senpai didn't cause Hayano To……”

”That's enough.”

The girl's firm voice interrupted my questions.

"This doesn't matter anymore, Narumi. We know it already."

I sighed and nodded. We've talked this out long ago, it's the territory of the detective from now on.

"Tetsu, I only want to know one thing. What did Minagawa Kengo try to do? You would probably have the pride of the defeated, answer me everything honestly, right?"

We waited for a long long time, and nobody made any movements in the process.

"…… I don't know."

Finally, Tetsu-senpai answered in a small voice.

"It's true. Minagawa always acted alone, doing something in the dark. He's that kind of person…… As for what he did, I don't know."

"Don't you know that he often went back to school even after he dropped out?"

"So you're talking about that. No…… He didn't go back to school."

Hearing Tetsu-senpai's answer, Alice's hair shook for awhile, and I nearly pounced on him as well. Not the school?

"After dropping out, Minagawa and I met near M High a few times. He said that he was going to a shrine."

"…… Shrine? Do you mean the shrine next to M High?"

"Probably? I don't know about the rest."

To the shrine? For what? To visit someone's grave? But Hayno Tomohiko's greave is somewhere else…… What is with this?

"His motive— was it the same as you all?"

"That's right."

Alice stared at somewhere near Tetsu-senpai’s forehead. After that, she walked down her bed, walking towards senpai with the bear in her hands.

”I understand. The questions end now, and we don’t need to cut off all relationships. Let us use our unique privileges as NEETs— using movements as light as Karyoubinga [2]to restore our former friendship!”

Alice extended a small hand to Tetsu-senpai. Seeing this scene, everyone’s expression seemed to relax in an instant. Yondaime, Major, Hiro-san— and even Tetsu-senpai.

After glancing at her hand, Tetsu-senpai turned away and said:

”What are you talking about? What cutting off relationships? How could I just leave an interesting kid like you? Even if you did cut off relationships with me that time, I would still visit you at your place!”

”— W- w- what are you talking about!? You rotten egg!”

The furious Alice kept bashing the small teddy bear onto Tetsu-senpai’s face.

”I- I thought of so much for you, and even prepared to shake hands to resolve our previous misunderstandings, but you…… Has your conduct and sensitivity been covered by the smoke in the pachinko shop, buried in the nicotine!? This is too annoying! You should send your brain away from dry cleaning……!”

”Ah— Mnn— Okay, okay.” Tetsu-senpai stood up and patted Alice’s head. “It’s my fault, so can you please let me go home? I’m bearing a two-thousandth part of Narumi’s injuries after all.”

Laughter finally rang out, it was Hiro-san and Major. Only Alice was still extremely annoyed.

”Tetsu, I wasn’t finished yet. You kneel there first, I must teach you a good lesson—“

”That’s right, Yondaime, sorry for bothering you.”

”There’s no next time. Think of something yourselves if you get into a fight next time.”

The two talked over Alice’s head, and then Tetsu-senpai opened the study door and walked out.

”Hey, shouldn’t we go back soon? Min-san is probably very worried.”

Hiro-san pulled Alice’s hand, while Major started to stuff things into his backpack.

”Really! Whatever, I’ll say the rest back at the office. Narumi, you can probably walk now, right? So why don’t you hurry up and wear your shirt to prepare to go back!?”

What a reckless person. But since Yondaime already kicked me off the bed, I could only put on my T-shirt, putting on my shoes with my brows furrowed. This is bad, with the muscle pains tomorrow, I would probably be in so much pain that it would feel like hell, wouldn’t I?

As we were about to get kicked out forcibly by Yondaime, Alice looked around the cramped room full of black shirted men.

”…… Mnn? Where had Ayaka gone to?”

Huh?

Ayaka?

”Erm…… She ran out just now.”

Rocky looked rather apologetic.

”Ah…… So Ayaka came before this!?”

Hearing my surprised voice, Alice answered in an unfazed tone:

”Then who do you think bandaged you? Really……”

I touched my cheeks that were stuck full of plasters.

…… Was that just a dream?

Ayaka's voice, Ayaka's words, and my answer.

At that moment, I suddenly recalled the strangeness that I felt in the dream, and immediately rushed forward to ask Alice.

”Oi oi, was Ayaka wearing an armband? It's black in color.”

Annoyance was written on Alice's face, and Hiro-san answered instead.

”That's right, she said that she ran over here right after club activities ended.”

I was speechless. So the thing that I felt odd about was this. Because on the evening that day— the last time Ayaka met me on the rooftop before she jumped off the building, she handed the armband to me.

But in the dream, she kept wearing the armband. If so, perhaps that wasn't a dream—

Ayaka still came to see me, and even bandaged me, and then……

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The next morning, Ayaka did not come to school, and nobody answered when I dialed her phone number. I had an uneasy premonition, and was thinking if I should call her house and ask, so I walked towards the staffroom. Coincidentally, I met Sayuri-sensei who looked extremely uneasy in the corridors, and almost even bumped into her.

”AH, Fu- Fujishima-kun— what's with all those injuries!? What happened to you!? Your whole appearance changed!”

”Eh? Ah, it's nothing, no big deal at all.”

”How can this be no big deal!? Oh my god, they turned purple already!”

”Ouch! Please don’t touch me, no, erm…… Sensei, are you okay?”

”Eh? Erm…… Well…… Let me ask you this, did Shinozaki-san contact you?”

Cold sweat poured down my back.

”No……”

”I heard that she didn’t go home from yesterday.”

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1. ↑ One of the Five Great Wisdom Kings, whose name comes from the vanquishment of greed, hatred and over-zealousness
2. ↑ A bird deity in Buddhism that is said to be born in snowy mountains, and can make elegant, beautiful sounds even in its shell. It is also often used as decoration on copper mirror frames, buildings and so on when Buddhism entered China.

Chapter 6

Alice, Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san, Major, Min-san, Yondaime and I frantically called everywhere we could think of, but not even one person knew of Ayaka's whereabouts. Yesterday, she disappeared after leaving the office.

Ayaka vanished into thin air.

Just like last time, she didn't leave me with even one word.

Right until Wednesday, Ayaka's location was still a mystery.

"Why did she disappear all of a sudden?"

As soon as I entered the Inspection office, Kousaka-senpai asked me immediately.

"We just don't know where she is right now, and she disappeared from the day before yesterday. Even though everyone helped to look for her."

"Fujishima-kun, is this related to you being so seriously hurt?"

"Ah— Actually……" Though I can't say that it's completely unrelated, it's really hard to explain.

"Err…… Well……" Kousaka-senpai leaned against the back of her chair once again. "Fujishima-kun, we're having the general meeting the day after tomorrow, this is not the time for us to do these things with you."

"I'm very sorry……"

"Are you okay? Not only do you look seriously hurt, you look terrible as well, and your eyes are swollen."

"That's because I kept running around."

I asked for sick leave yesterday as well, using the power of

Hirasaka-gumi to search for Ayaka's location. Though it was hard for me to walk because of my injuries and muscle pains, I still ran directly to his father's place to have a look. I didn't see Toshi-san there though.

I felt weary from my heart. Even so, I couldn't just ignore the Student Council. If I continue to do nothing, all that I did for Ayaka before this would be wasted.

"So you still can't persuade the Student Council president?"

"Yeah, it seems that she's even more stubborn now. She might continue with a six person limit after this."

That's true. That person started to become stubborn. Even if she got into a direct confrontation with the sports teachers, I think she would probably still forcibly pass the rules amendment in the general meeting. Besides, she has far more influence in the club president meeting than Kousaka-senpai.

"If that's true, restoring the Gardening Committee might be really hard……"

Kousaka-senpai said in a small voice, while I could only nod silently.

Though I didn't mention it to Kousaka-senpai, but for the Gardening Committee to be restored, lowering the lowest limit of the clubs is a mandatory condition. If not, many people would suspect why only the Gardening Club is given preferential treatment as the abolished clubs increase. Just imagining it would inform people of how hard things are, if a similar objection is raised, thinking of going up shore is even harder.

So it's already—

"Sorry for saying all those opinionated things."

"W- wait a minute, Fujishima-kun, you don't need to apologize since you've already put in a lot of effort. And besides, there are still two days left, so I will do all I can."

Kousaka-senpai hopped around while supporting herself on the table with her hands, forcing out a strong look. Her hearty laugh resounded in the hollowness in my body, making my heart ache.

Ayaka left without saying anything again, and the Gardening Club is facing abolishment. What is with this? What in the world is with this situation? I put in so much effort and ran around so much, screaming in my heart, struggling painfully and even hurt my own companion, causing scars to accumulate on myself—

And the results was actually this, it just doesn't make any sense.

I walked out of the school while holding my bike. When I stepped on the pedal, the gentle wind of May pierced my wounds.

That time, did I say something that I shouldn't?

Alice once told me, Ayaka was bandaging me at the time, and I kept mumbling when I was lying on the bed— while Ayaka answered me as well.

After that, I sank into deep slumber once again, while Ayaka walked quietly out of the room.

If so, the dream of the rooftop……

I really wasn't sure. And can such a thing happen anyways? I couldn't have spoken out loud what I said in my dream, while I can't prove that Ayaka did say anything as well.

Even so, I still tried hard to think back, did I say anything that might cause a misunderstanding?

But I still couldn't make anything clear in the end.

Shedding tears while riding my bike, I could only hope that it was the wind that hurt the wounds on my face. If not, my tears might not be able to stop.

I parked my bike carefully when I reached the ramen shop, and I spaced out in front of the portiere for quite some time. Though I didn't have much expectations, I immediately found out that Ayaka was not in the shop. There was only one silhouette left at the other side of the portiere— Min-san.

I really wasn't in the mood to open the door and walk in, so I just walked around to the back alley. There wasn't anyone at the kitchen backdoor.

Everyone was probably looking around for Ayaka today as well. I sat alone on the second step of the back stairs, taking out my phone to check for messages. Of course, I didn't receive Ayaka's message, while there were a lot of messages from the gang members who helped to search for Ayaka instead. When I realized that there was no progress after I finished reading all of the messages, I heaved a long sigh.

Alice sealed herself in her room from that day on, and didn't let even me inside. To her, Ayaka's disappearance might be a huge blow to her.

Because of that, there was still a piece of the puzzle that wasn't complete in Hayano Tomohiko's case, causing the truth to be unable to be revealed. Of course, that's a thought coming from Alice's perspective, while to me, I wasn't sure of the whole matter from the start.

What did Tetsu-senpai do?

Was the greenhouse really the place that Hayano Tomohiko collapsed at?

If so, who moved him by the school entrance?

Who is the killer?

Killer? I suddenly thought of something. I recall that Alice once mentioned this particular word. Does that mean Hayano Tomohiko might have been murdered? By whom? And for what purpose?

And the matter about Minagawa Kengo.

Though there were a lot of questions in my mind— all of them don't matter now.

I feel as though everything will disappear from my side. Not only Ayaka, but also my NEET companions and Alice.

Why did it turn out like this? Did I do anything wrong?

I repeatedly thought about all of the possibilities, but no matter how I thought about it, my thoughts still returned there.

It's probably written like this in my page of God's notebook: 'Just die in loneliness.'

Even so, I met Ayaka. That was a miracle that almost overthrew God's plan, so that's why Ayaka had to face a cruel, inescapable fate, having to jump down from the top of a building. Even when a second miracle happened, causing her to open her eyes, because she got closer to me once again, it was as though all of her white pieces were turned black in the last few steps in a game of Othello. Many things were pieced together, causing Ayaka to go missing in the end.

God won. What a joke!

Why was the plan not better thought out from the start? Why did the miracles happen!?

From the moment that I was given birth until I die, You should have let me be alone! If so…… If so, Ayaka wouldn't need to undergo this kind of treatment—

All of a sudden, the sound of the door opening interrupted my thoughts.

"What are you doing? There aren't any customers here right now, so you can come in the shop."

I turned around slowly. Min-san poked out half of her body out of the half-open door, her bare shoulders a piercing sight.

Would this person disappear one day as well? While thinking of such a thing, I shook my head.

Min-san knitted her brows slightly and walked into the kitchen again, walking out some time after that. She suddenly pressed the cup of ice cream in her hands on my injured cheek.

“It huuuuuuuuuuuuuurts! What are you doing!?”

Because of the extreme fright, coldness and pain, I nearly did a somersault when I jumped.

“That’s because you look somewhat forlorn. How is it? Have you cheered up yet?”

I sighed and sat down once again.

Min-san came closer, sitting at a distance so near that she could almost touch my shoulders. The place that she touched felt rather hot. I deliberately thought that it was caused by Tetsu-senpai’s punches. I couldn’t look Min-san in the face.

“Oi, why don’t you hurry up and eat it?”

I didn’t even have the energy to scoop the ice cream into my mouth, so I could only watch them melting gradually in the cup.

“Let me tell you something.”

Min-san said dismissively after eating her portion of the ice cream:

“Believe it.”

I finally raised my head slowly to look at Min-san. Looking at her fiery eyes, I fell into dejection once more.

“…… Believe what?”

“Everything.”

“I’m…… not as strong as you, Min-san…… I can’t do such a thing.”

“You’re very strong! Though you might not know it yet, I know.”

“If you’re talking about the matter that I’m now known as one of the Four Heavenly Kings because I defeated Tetsu-senpai, then please don’t. It feels really idiotic.”

“I’m not talking about that. Think about it yourself……”

Min-san’s cold hand caught my wrist.

“Aren’t you still alive right now?”

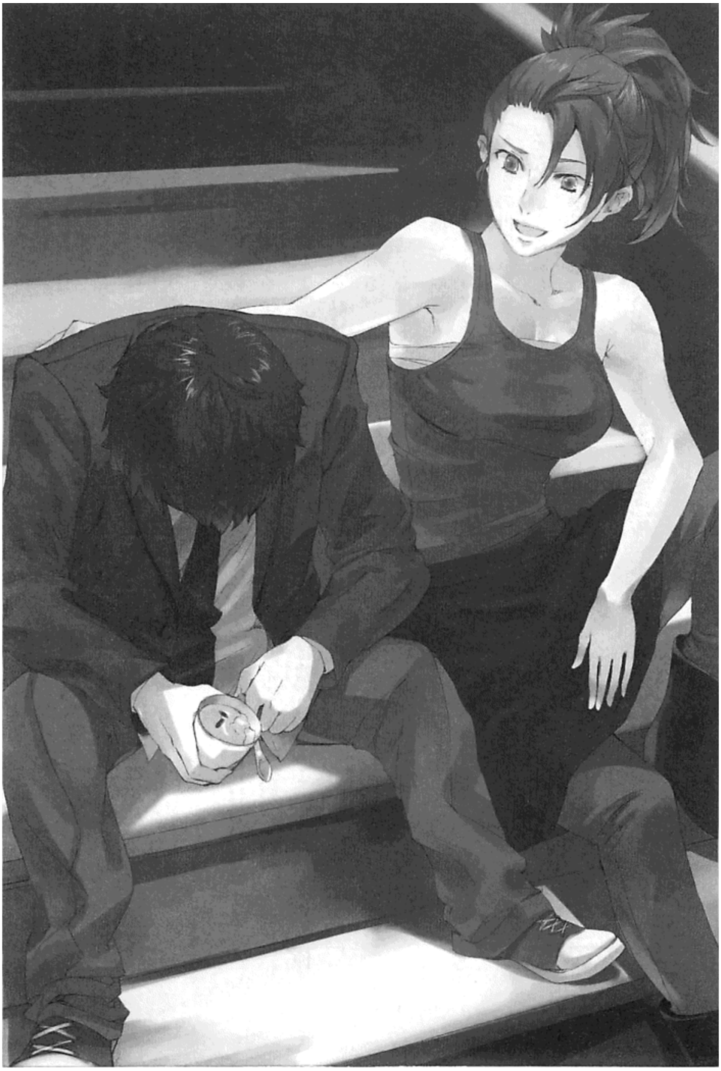
I lightly raised my head and saw a pair of kind eyes.

“You encountered so many terrible things, both your body and soul were harshly attacked, and you even saw so many poor souls who were dragged to hell without a reason, but you’re still living your life properly.”

“That’s because—“

Being stared at by Min-san, I felt a hot emotion being transmitted to me, causing myself to be unable to speak.

“It’s not that I’m strong. That was because there was someone by my side supporting me each time.”



“That’s fine enough. Don’t people often say that luck is a type of strength? Though that’s a lie, this is true— having companions is one of your strengths. It’s a strong point that belongs to your world.”

My world’s— strong point……

But my world is actually facing utter dissolution.

“That’s why I’m telling you to believe it.”

Min-san held my wrist tightly.

“Your world isn’t as fragile as you imagine.”

Even though I heard such kind words, it was as though I was a kid who was near tears after being blown down by wind, tightly clutching at Min-san’s warmth with only one finger, unable to speak even one work. How am I supposed to believe this!?

At that moment, the phone in my pocket started to ring. The rousing guitar prelude of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ rang, sounding as though it threw fear, uneasiness and questions into a steaming pot at the same time.

To muster the courage to pick up the phone, I must once again ask Min-san to hold my hand tightly. How can I be said as strong like this?

‘Prepare to take action tomorrow at six.’ Alice ordered.

“…… What does that mean?”

My voice was so hoarse that even I, myself, couldn’t hear it clearly. Take action?

‘Do you even have to ask? Of course it’s the results of our investigation.’

Investigation? Since it’s already too late now, it doesn’t matter at all.

‘Everything is clear now, there’s not even one question left now.’

“Is that so? Then congratulations.”

‘What is with your weak answer? I’m telling you that everything is clear now. As an assistant detective, you should feel happier or more joyful about this!’

What do you mean I should feel happier about this? So what if the mystery is solved now? Hasn't Ayaka already gone missing!?

'So are the holes at the two sides of your head an entrance and an exit? Haven't I told you that everything is clear now?'

"So wha—"

'And I know how Ayaka is right now as well.'

I stood up. Even though Min-san was angry because of me pushing her down, her cup full of ice cream spilled onto the ground, I didn't notice it. What did Alice say just now?

"A- Ayaka, she……?"

'Are you looking down on me? A NEET detective is 'omniscient', she can see through everything, but cannot come in contact with anything—'

"W- where is she right now? Is she okay?"

'Prepare to take action at six tomorrow.'

"Oi, Alice! Don't mess around! Hurry up and tell me! Alice! Alice!"

She hung up. Though I knew that it was fruitless, I continued to dial Alice's phone number repeatedly. Of course, no one answered. I really couldn't take it anymore, and was about to rush up the stairs, Min-san suddenly twisted my ear forcefully at a side.

"Oi, Narumi, don't you have anything to say to me?"

"Ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch! Sorry! I'm sorry! Thank you, Min-san!"

At the moment when I was about to cry, Min-san finally loosened her hand. I thought that the skin on my face would be peeled off from my wounds……

"Think about it, it's useless even if you go to Alice's place right now. It's impossible that she would let you in."

“That’s…… That’s not wrong, but……!”

“Just go home for today. You should sleep earlier when you’re injured. Don’t you have to wake early tomorrow?”

Min-san flicked on my forehead.

“And you should really believe in Alice.”

After hearing that, I forcibly swallowed my agitated emotions surrounding me that were about to erupt.

Why didn’t Alice explain immediately? Nothing happened to Ayaka, did it? Unlucky thoughts filling my mind, I pondered while riding home.

And of course, I couldn’t sleep at all.

*

Half past five early morning next day.

Looking at the sky with approaching daylight at my right, I rode my back into the alley between the buildings. My sleep-deprived mind was still foggy, and I felt that the sky was exceptionally piercing though the sun hasn’t risen yet.

A petite silhouette was sitting on the lowest step of the emergency backstairs. It was Alice in mourning attire.

“I never thought that once again, I have to rely on the barbaric transport from primitive times known as a bicycle. Though I’m really unwilling to, there is no other choice. I decided not to accept Hiro’s help, after all.”

Alice used her black veil to cover her green face, voice trembling slightly. The small teddy bear on her knees was already half-squashed.

"Oi, where is Ayaka? Can’t you at least tell me if she’s okay?”

"I can't tell you yet."

"Why!?"

"From this moment on, the unraveling of the mystery is irrelevant to Ayaka. You'll know when it ends."

"You're always being so roundabout every time!"

"Don't scream piteously like that of a zombie, if you faint because of anemia, I'm going to be very troubled. Did you not sleep yesterday?"

"It's more surprising if I could!"

"Are you really so worried of Ayaka?"

For some reason, the NEET detective looked at me from below the shade of the thin veil with a sincere gaze.

"Why? Why do you care so much about Ayaka?"

"I'm the one who should be questioning you why you're asking me so many questions! Of course it's because I'm worried about her! Because Ayaka is my……!"

"Your……?"

"My—"

My voice choked in my throat. What is Ayaka to me? A friend? Is that term really appropriate? If it's appropriate, why was Ayaka's expression so sad in my dream? No, was that really just a dream? Was it truly a dream? I'm starting to get confused.

Alice stood up. With a dull thud, she pressed her doll on my belly.

"Being unable to express this in words is a type of answer as well. Go. We might have to pass through quite some places without rooftops, I wish to end this matter earlier."

Though it was already near the end of May, riding a bike in the cracks of dawn is still quite cold. A doll separated the warmth of Alice's body and my back, but it still felt exceptionally clear.

I turned my head over to ask when we were crossing the bridge:

"So everything ends just like this?"

When the NEET detective is in mourning attire— that would signify the revival of the words of the deceased, and they are spoken through other people, restoring the reputation of the dead while harming the living. From now on, all of the mysteries will be unraveled by Alice's hands.

Alice said— everything is linked to Ayaka. Why?

"Is Ayaka really so deeply involved in this matter? Because……"

"Don't- don't you keep speaking to me."

Alice's answer was accompanied with sounds of her teeth chattering. Perhaps it's because the road in this area is rather uneven?

When I rode to the main road, Alice finally answered:

"Everything ends today. Isn't it the Student Council general meeting tomorrow? We might still make it."

The Student Council general meeting. I nearly turned my head around to look at her while pedaling again.

"H- hey! Please look forward when you are riding? Not only you are on the bike!"

"S- sorry!"

I never thought that Alice would actually mind a thing like this. I thought she was only interested in unraveling mysteries. For whom did she do this for? For Ayaka? Or for me?

Or to speak for the dead?

I rode down the gently curving path. There weren't any houses at the two sides. A factory was on my left, a shrine was on my right , while the large school building of my school is blocking the nascent rays of sunlight.

"Don't ride to the school, just stop at the shrine."

"Stop at the shrine? Why?"

"Just stop there. I have an appointment with someone."

The shrine. I remember that Tetsu-senpai once said that Minagawa Kengo often went there even after he dropped out.

Is there something of note there?

I parked my bike by the entrance of the shrine. Alice nearly fell down from the backseat with her doll, and I hastily held onto her. Does this count as carsickness? Usually, her face was already stark white, but now it glowed with the unfortunate green that appears when glass is stacked together.

"Can you still walk?"

"…… Yes."

"Are you really okay? I think it's better for you to hold on to me."

"…… Uuuu—"

As before, Alice tightly held on to my belt.

I walked forwards while being pushed by her, passing through the entrance of the shrine. It was a broken down shrine that had so sign of an abbot. There was a path leading to a cemetery at our left, while a uniform-clad silhouette was standing there. When we met each other's gazes, both of us shouted at the same time in shock.

"Fujishima…… kun? S- so it really is you!?"

"Kaoruko-senpai!? W- why?"

“That’s my line, why are we gathering at a place like thi—“

Kaoruko-senpai stopped halfway through her words, because she saw Alice walking out from my back.

“Narumi was not the one who asked you out. The message was sent by me. Nice to meet you.”

“You…… sent it? Who are you? Wh- why do you know so much about Tomohiko and I?”

My mind was in a confused state as well, but I could grasp the current situation more or less. Alice probably sent a message to Kaoruko-senpai in my name, asking her out. It probably contains some personal information that she couldn’t ignore in the message as well.

But why is the person here Kaoruko-senpai?

Alice’s left hand was tightly holding on my belt, while her right hand cuddled her doll, speaking in a determined tone that doesn’t match her appearance:

“I am a NEET detective, a messenger for the dead. I have come to locate Hayano Tomohiko’s lost words, conveying it to the place that it should be.”

“Wha—“ Kaoruko-senpai looked rather displeased, and glared at me. “What is with this situation? Is this a prank? Fujishima-kun, who is this little girl?”

“Hayano Tomohiko was murdered.”

That was Alice’s response. Even for Karouko-senpai to stay quiet, the help of an assistant detective isn’t required at all. That’s because I don’t know what to as well.

“He was…… murdered?” Senpai inquired.

Was he really murdered?

“From a certain perspective, he was. At least, Hayano Tomohiko understood that there was a possibility of such an interpretation, so that's how the first changes in the case were caused. If not, the truth of this case is actually quite simple, and should have been revealed four years ago. Because of the overlapping thoughts of many people, the truth was hidden. As for me, I am going to expose the buried words of the deceased under the sunlight right now. Hayano Tomohiko, and also Minagawa Kengo— there are two people in total who should hear their words. One of them is you— Hayano Kaoruko."

I wonder if she understands what Alice is talking about.

I asked for Kaoruko-senpai who couldn't move at all:

"…… Then who is the other?"

"The murderer."

A chill came upon my back.

Alice started to push on my back, pushing me towards the cemetery.

"Senpai?" I asked timidly. "Why don't we set out? You can probably find out something important. Though I'm not sure if it would be good or bad for you to find out about this."

Kaoruko-senpai's originally blank gaze suddenly recovered its radiance, and she stared at me.

"That is something that you must know."

Going along with Alice's pushes, I passed by the tombstones and columbariums. Looking back slightly, I saw that Kaoruko-senpai seemed to be following with uneasy footsteps.

"…… But why the cemetery?"

Senpai's voice was trembling slightly. The cemetery seemed to have been long forgotten, weeds growing all around, while each tombstone was covered with dust, even the names on them were faded as well.

“Being a cemetery or not is insignificant. The most important thing is, it’s directly next to M High.”

Alice explained while standing at my back. The school grounds of M High was at the other side of the wall. The triangular greenhouse roof dazzling because of the morning sun could still be seen in front of the school building as well.

When we continued to walk towards the cemetery, the barren state was even more horrendous. Dried up grass grew everywhere, while there wasn’t even stones paving the ground, the soil directly exposed. The amount of rubbish like damaged water tanks and charred blue plastic pads increased visibly as well. There wasn’t even a tombstone at the corner position, and was like a building construction site abandoned halfway through the process.

“That’s the one.”

Alice pointed at a corner of the cemetery while saying. In front of the wall that had weeds gathering in front of it, there was a certain object— it looked like a very broad board.

When we slowly approached the target, Kaoruko-senpai found something odd even earlier than me.

“…… Is it a blackboard?”

That’s right, it was indeed a blackboard. When I swept aside the grass, a blackboard stained with dirt and mud appeared. It seemed like it was a dismantled blackboard, as the rack with the wheels were placed behind the board.

“Narumi, please turn it over.”

I followed Alice’s instructions, toppling it by pulling on the top of the board. There were signs of what looked like red paint painted from the middle of the blackboard back right until the upper right corner.

“…… What? What does this thing mean?”

Kaoruko-senpai asked in an anxious tone.

Alice chose not to answer, continuing to order me: “Narumi, clean away the paint.”

I wasn’t sure what was happening as well, but I still took out the turpentine from my bag as Alice ordered. The paint seemed to be painted on quite some time ago, so it was somewhat hard to remove it completely. In the acrid smell that pervaded the air, black stains appeared below the removed paint.

“That’s fine already, Narumi. The things that had been hidden in the past are completely clear right now.”

When I was going on with my work, Alice said while using one of her hands to hold on to Kaoruko-senpai while the other to cover her nose.

“What…… is this? What’s wrong with this blackboard?”

“The black stains that you see right now is the blood that Hayano Tomohiko threw up.”

I heard Kaoruko-senpai gulping.

“Wh- what are you…… talking about?”

Looking at Alice who was leaning closely to her, senpai said in agitation.

“When I looked through the teaching equipment management list of M High, I noticed that a moveable blackboard disappeared without a reason three years ago. This is the one.”

“Does that mean Hayano Tomohiko collapsed here?” I inquired. Why this place? Besides, this place is quite some distance from the place where he was found.

“Wrong wrong wrong. Haven’t I told you before? The place that he collapsed at was the greenhouse. Similar to Hayano Tomohiko’s situation, this blackboard was moved as well. As for the reason that there weren’t any bloodstains at the place where he was found and the crime scene, that’s because Hayano Tomohiko’s blood was left on this blackboard and the snowy ground.”

"Snow? Why? He was obviously in the greenhouse—"

Alice shook her head. Standing beside her, Kaoruko-senpai's face was stark white long ago, staring at the blackboard by her feet—eying the old bloodstains made by her own brother.

Alice raised her head to look at Kaoruko-senpai and started her explanation:

"I'll just explain this in order. The reason that this case is so complicated is because there are three facilitators out of the murderer's expectations, while these three people contributed to the hiding of the truth in a completely unexpected manner. The first person's role was to move Hayano Tomohiko by the school entrance, causing the others to mistake the crime scene."

"The facilitator that you spoke of…… Who is it?"

"The said first facilitator was actually Hayano Tomohiko himself."

"You…… Don't mess with me!"

Kaoruko-senpai screamed. If senpai didn't do so, I might have already pounced on Alice to get things clear.

"Why? Why would Tomohiko do such a thing? Do you mean Tomohiko who collapsed because of his illness could actually crawl on the snowy ground to the school entrance without assistance?"

"That's right."

"Why!?"

What is Alice talking about? Hayano Tomohiko crawled to the school entrance himself? Why? Even though his own life was in danger?

I didn't have the confidence to listen silently till the last second. And are all these connected to Ayaka? Will I get to know about all of this after things end?"

"I'll explain all of this together later. The second facilitator's role was to pretend that he was the main reason that caused Hayano Tomohiko to die, and his aim was to hide the true killer.”

“…… Was it Tetsu-senpai?”

I asked in surprise.

“That’s right, it was Ichinomiya Tetsuo. But Tetsu wasn’t in the greenhouse that day at all. I’m thinking that the gathering of the Gardening Committee delinquents in the greenhouse to bully Hayano Tomohiko together was probably a lie that they concocted together, as there isn’t any concrete proof at all. And that means, not one fact can prove that Tetsu did ask Hayano Tomohiko to be his gofer that day. He’s just the first witness, seeing Hayano Tomohiko crawl to the school entrance with his own determination. He probably heard all about the truth from Hayano Tomohiko, and decided to be the scapegoat after calling the ambulance.”

Tetsu-senpai— he was indeed lying.

But why did he do so? He might even be arrested if things aren’t clear.

“That’s not wrong. But to Tetsu that time, he had nothing to lose anymore.”

Alice looked upwards at the sky with a melancholic gaze.

“That time, Tetsu had no other alternative but to give up on because of glaucoma. Narumi, you revealed that using your fists. The owner of the boxing hall treated him like his adopted son, allowing him to further his studies to high school. At the moment when Tetsu found out that he couldn’t repay him for raising him with his fists, he already planned to leave school and the boxing hall to be a NEET. So—“

Alice looked at Kaoruko-senpai’s face once again.

“He inherited Hayano Tomohiko’s dying wish, unhesitatingly sacrificing himself.”

“Wh— at……”

Kaoruko-senpai's expression was tangled together long ago, and her voice became erratic as well.

"…… This— must be…… a lie. What dying wish. Why would Tomohiko, for something like this……"

"The next one is the third person's role. I'm guessing that he either found Hayano Tomohiko along with Tetsu, or he was informed by Tetsu about this, and rushed to the greenhouse that became the crime scene, and perceived one fact after looking at the condition of the scene. He decided to dispose of the evidence right after that."

Alice pointed at the greenhouse separated from us by a wall not far from here, and pushed Kaoruko-senpai forward. Senpai's face was still pale, and she walked rather unsteadily. I hastily put away the turpentine into my bag as well, chasing them hurriedly. Disposal of evidence? Does that refer to the blackboard?

"Narumi, look. You're probably quite familiar with this, are you not?"

We walked about ten over meters along the wall. There was a large board about my height covering the wall. I nodded in answer, toppling the board onto the barren ground.

A large missing slab of bricks was covered by the board, and couldn't even be described just by saying that it's a hole. The wall was destroyed to the extent that a person could easily pass by it, while steel bars were exposed all along the gap.

And this gap was coincidentally located opposite to the greenhouse backdoor.

I am very familiar with this secret path.

That's because everything started from here. The poppy flowers that became the raw material of Angel Fix, and Ayaka who cultivated them unknowingly. Ayaka's brother, Toshi, smuggled out the raw material from this path.

"What…… is this? Why is there a path like this? But then, so what?"

Kaoruko-senpai said in contempt. That's right as well, senpai doesn't know anything. This is just a whole lot of empty words. That's because the only people who know of this secret route are the organization manufacturing Angel Fix, the NEET Detective Squad who went after them and Hirasaka-gumi. Even the police don't know about it.

"Actually, there's another person who knew about this." Alice answered my mumblings. "…… The person who created this path."

The creator?

Ah…… No, wait a minute. The reason that the drug manufacturers knew about this path in the first place was because—

"…… Was Minagawa Kengo the one who created it?"

I never thought about it before this— the existence of this possibility. But this path was indeed man-made.

"He was the third facilitator."

Alice said in a small voice.

"He had only one motive, to get rid of the blackboard stained with Hayano Tomohiko's blood, and it in a short time after the case occurred. The blackboard was an old modeled wooden blackboard, so the blood probably seeped into the blackboard already, and it's useless even if it was washed. Being aware about that fact— it's my assumptions starting from now— he opened the backdoor, stuffing the blackboard between the small slit between the wall and the greenhouse."

Alice pointed at the wall while saying.

"But it was only an emergency act. As the outer wall of the greenhouse is made of glass material, even though the inner part of the greenhouse can't be seen clearly because of the surrounding racks, the blackboard could still be seen. I'm thinking that this board was probably placed at the other side of the wall that time, and was used to block the blackboard from the outside."

“So does this mean that this hole was opened to move the blackboard?”

“That’s right. Witnesses testified that Minagawa Kengo still frequented the school even after he dropped out because of a lack of credits. However, he wasn’t actually going to school, but was secretly damaging the wall from the cemetery.”

I fixed my gaze on the metal door at the other side of the wall once again.

“As long as that object is in the greenhouse, there is a chance that it would be found out. But moving such a large item out of the school is too hard, so that’s why he made a hole in the wall. I’m guessing that this part of the wall was already nearing collapse, because it would always be rammed on every time the backdoor is opened. But enlarging the hole so much that even a blackboard could pass through was probably done single-handedly by Minagawa Kengo.”

Because— nobody knew about what he did. A lonely expression suddenly appeared on Alice’s face.

The lost words of the dead that nobody could find, Alice found them. Using Tetsu-senpai’s words, piecing together the numerous fragments.

“As such, the reason that Minagawa Kengo took over the jobs of the Gardening Committee and forcibly established the Gardening Club — do you understand it now?”

Did Alice direct those words at me or at Kaoruko-senpai? I just don’t know. Holding onto Alice whose body was much smaller than her, Kaoruko-senpai finally stood up after some effort, while her gaze was fixed on the greenhouse entrance at the other side of the huge hole.

Which was also the thing that Minagawa Kengo used all his effort to protect.

“He did it…… only to prevent other people from finding this thing?”

Senpai asked weakly.

“That is correct, everything was done for this matter. If the greenhouse is torn down, everything that Minagawa Kengo did will be exposed under the sunlight. A large object like a blackboard cannot be handled by one person alone, so he could only move it to the deserted boundary of the cemetery, letting it rot naturally. If the secret pathway is found out, someone might just reach this place, so that’s why he founded the Gardening Club. Besides that— there’s probably another symbolic reason that they must protect the greenhouse for.”

Alice looked at the top of the triangular greenhouse roof, a sharp expression on her face.

The thing that Minagawa tried to much to protect is actually—

Finally, something was about to get pieced together in my mind.

The victim and the witnesses twisted the truth of the case just to hide the murderer.

The thing that they wanted to protect.

“Why!? I don’t understand, why did they try so hard to protect a greenhouse? Besides, if— if things are really as you said, does that mean even Tomohiko was one of the facilitators? Wasn’t he murdered? Why did he still……?”

“You are absolutely correct. The thing that Minagawa Kengo, Ichinomiya Tetsuo and Hayano Tomohiko was the same. Look.”

The arm that was black because of the mourning attire pointed at the sky— right at the greenhouse roof reflecting the rays of the morning sun.

At that moment, a weak sound suddenly rang. It was the sound produced when a motor undergoes friction with metal.

Just when Kaoruko-senpai and I narrowed our eyes to look at it, the sunlight suddenly scattered disorderly, starting to change their angle of reflection as well. The roof of the greenhouse was moving.

The skylight fell into the greenhouse, opening slowly.

Like a pair of hands preparing to catch something, holding it in one's lap.

Like a pair of glass wings.

After that, the sunlight that was not hindered by anything shone in directly, causing the colors of the floral vegetation to become even more dazzling.

The drops of water from the rain last night flowed along the open skylight, falling into the rays of sunlight while glittering.

"This thing killed Hayano Tomohiko."

Alice's soft explanation melted into the tranquil dawn.

"Do you see the gray box below the framework? That is a temperature and sunlight detector controlled by a thermostat. I think you can probably see a round lamp hung below it as well. If a heat or light source is placed near the detector, the thermostat will activate mistakenly, closing the heater while opening the skylight. It's the same no matter it's the morning, or a *snowy day*."

A snowy day—

I started to imagine the snowy scene that day.

Snow was accumulated on the glass roof. There were only two people in the greenhouse that had the heater turned on and a warmly lit light. A blackboard, tables and chairs, and textbooks. Hayano Tomohiko was the only student present that day. The electric light in the greenhouse suddenly stopped shining. Probably one of the circuits short circuited because of snow.

A smile showed on Sayuri-sensei's face.

That's okay, please wait a moment. It'll light up after moving it slightly. Hayano-kun, can you please turn off the circuit breaker? Mnn, that's fine. It's lit, it's lit!

Sorry, I have to go for a staff meeting, can you please do revision by yourself for now?

After that, Hayano Tomohiko was left all alone in the greenhouse, while the thermostat heated by the electric light activated in mistake. The heater was turned off……

The skylight opened……

A large pile of snow fell on him……

The blackboard collapsed—

“That’s enough, Narumi.”

I felt a hand gripping my arm tightly, slender fingers in a black glove sinking into my skin.

It was Alice.

I shifted my gaze from the greenhouse roof mysteriously reflecting the rays of sunlight, turned around, and saw Kaoruko-senpai squatting by Alice’s side while covering her ears. Her shoulders, back, and black hair were all trembling.

“Tomohiko, he…… Actually……”

I could only stand there blankly. I didn’t just say everything out, did I?

Or maybe Kaoruko-senpai saw the exact same thing that I did?

Alice said while placing her hand gently on senpai’s back:

“Of course, that’s just an accident.”

I couldn’t see the detective’s face from my position. What expression is on her face right now?

While what kind of expression is on my face as well?

“Though your brother coughed out blood, he still understood the reason for the accident. If a person has problems with one’s heart, he would probably have something to be used in emergencies, but he was aware of what would happen if he was found in that situation, so he did not ask for help from anyone, but went outside by himself. Perhaps he deliberately avoided the school building, passing through the courtyard? Leaving the greenhouse as far as possible without letting anyone realize it, that was your brother's aim."

"And then…… And then he just died. Idiot, isn't that just plain stupid!?"

Kaoruko-senpai raised her head, tears drawing out a bright streak on her face.

"That might be so. But your brother's efforts were not wasted, because the first people to find him were Ichinomiya Tetsuo and Minagawa Kengo."

That was an indescribably chilling miracle.

"The three had the same sentiments. That's because they were all students from the mystical class full of flowers, even if they had to give up on their futures, the thing that they wanted to protect was the same— the one and only teacher who didn't give up on them."

I couldn't help but kneel down by Alice's side as well.

Something seemed to be overflowing soon. As though seeing a scene made of light rays, colors, flowers and laughter, the conversation between the graduates from the *classroom full of flowers* that I met in front of Minagawa Kengo's grave was mixed in it as well, and the sorrowful gaze when Tetsu-senpai was beating me up……

Ayaka, who smiled while being surrounded by flowers……

And finally, Sayuri-sensei who showed the same dazzling smile opposite to her.

Everyone wanted to protect all of this. If the truth is found out, even though it was only an accident, Sayuri-sensei would probably still lose her job. That's why……

So many things were sacrificed. The reason for concealing the truth was to protect her.

“Why? W- Who are you? Why do you know even this? Why didn’t you— Why didn’t you just hide all of this from other people? Why did you……!?”

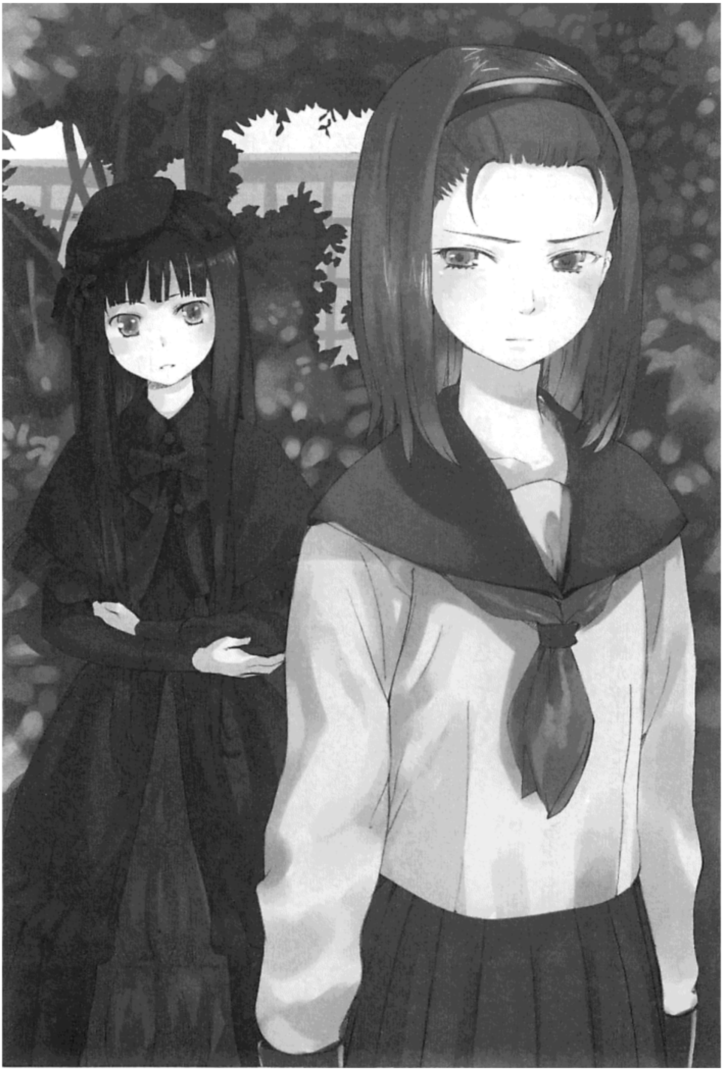
Kaoruko-senpai stood up, shouting loudly while holding Alice’s shoulders.

Alice extended her hands gently, covering Kaoruko-senpai’s face.

“I repeat . I am a NEET detective, a messenger for the deceased. Digging other people’s graves to locate words lost; harming the living just to protect the honor of the dead, shaming the deceased to console the living. Because you cannot be ignorant of this matter— which is also what your brother wanted to protect.”

“Why? I don’t want to know!”

“You’re asking me why? Didn’t you plan to destroy the place that your brother was trying to protect without knowing anything?



Kaoruko-senpai stayed silent.

“But you know of Hayano Tomohiko’s words right now. The thing that he wished to protect was completed by Minagawa and Tetsu, so that’s why the greenhouse could continue to exist, and there are still flowers blooming in this school. This is an undeniable truth.”

Alice closed together her palms, lightly putting it in front of Kaoruko-senpai’s chest.

“So you must accept this matter, isn’t that right?”

Kaoruko-senpai couldn’t give any response. After leaving Alice’s side, senpai stood alone on the dry, cracked ground, looking at the greenhouse roof. The senpai right now looked like she didn’t want to suppress herself anymore, tears falling non-stop.

“…… The problem is, there is only one day left.”

After that, senpai’s tearful voice rang.

“What you want me to do? There’s no other choice. And I…… don’t have that intention……”

Alice took one or two steps back weakly.

I supported her small body lightly from her back.

“Narumi probably told you of the way before this.”

Alice’s voice lost its gentle feel.

“The mission of the detective is already accomplished. Hayano Kaoruko, the rest is up to you to decide.”

Senpai bit her lips, gripping her own hands tightly.

Why did Alice choose Kaoruko-senpai to be the target for the words of the dead?

That was just because she is Hayano Tomohiko’s sister— because she has the ability to accept his thoughts, protecting it as well.

I said while holding onto Alice’s delicate body:

“Senpai, on the day of the general meeting, I will still suggest an amendment for your suggestion. Even if you could finish counting the members of a club with one hand, to some people, that might still be a very important place.”

Just like the greenhouse was important to Hayano Tomohiko.

To Ayaka and I—

“Just as I said on Monday, can you please restore the Gardening Committee? If you would agree……”

“How is that possible!”

Kaoruko-senpai covered her ears once again:

“Please, don’t speak anymore! I’m almost at my limits right now, and am very confused! Originally…… Originally, I didn’t know anything!”

Kaoruko-senpai immediately turned around and ran away from the scene. I looked at her silhouette passing through the weathered tombstones and columbariums, and she was then lost in the forecourt of the shrine.

After watching her leave, Alice and I were still closely huddled together, standing there silently for quite some time. I could really understand senpai’s pain. The things that are accumulated unknowingly after a long time cannot be gently melted by the truth.

That is why it is better not to find out about most of the things buried deep under the ground.

To know is to die.

Even so—

“Hey, Alice.”

“Mnn.”

“Didn’t you say that there are two people who must know of the truth?”

One of them is Kaoruko-senpai. Then the other one is—

“Mnn, I don’t know as well.”

Alice answered softly.

“I don’t know if I should tell Kuroda Sayuri about this matter.”

"That's unusual. Usually, you would definitely say that a detective cannot protect or help anyone or something like that, telling the other party immediately."

No matter how cruel the truth is, it is only a choice. Because of that, Alice would tell the words that anyone is unwilling to know of to the surviving people. However……

"But if she knows of the truth, Kuroda Sayuri might resign."

"Mnn, my thoughts exactly."

In sensei's heart, Tetsu-senpai and Minagawa Kengo are still the sinners who bullied Hayano Tomohiko, causing him to die. If we don't expose the words of the deceased, their honor cannot be restored. Even so, does doing this right now have any meaning? It would only hurt sensei even more.

"So that's why I'm only telling you. I'm leaving the rest for you to decide."

Alice raised her head and looked backwards at me. Separated by a black veil, Alice's face turned around. Even so, a faint sadness was on her face, so I couldn't answer her at all.

If I tell Sayuri-sensei about this truth, exposing the thing that Minagawa Kengo wanted to protect under the sun, and then asking the teachers to support the reestablishment of the Gardening Committee— such a thought suddenly flitted past my mind.

But this is just like blackmail. How can I do this?

Besides, it might not make it now. The Student Council general meeting is on tomorrow.

Even if the Gardening Committee is established once more like this, Ayaka is still—

"That's right, Alice."

"Mnn?"

“Where is Ayaka? You said that she is connected to everything, what does that mean?”

Her name did not appear from the start to the end. What is with this? Where did Ayaka run off to?

“Oh, you’re talking about that.”

Alice turned around, shrugging in a helpless manner.

“I never thought that you would actually be ignorant about this right until now.”

“What….. does that mean?”

“Really. I suggest that you’d better increase your observation sensitivity, and try to shift your attention to illogical matters. Aren’t you an assistant detective?”

“So what does that mean?”

“Who do you think found the blackboard first, and confirmed if it was covered in paint? Also, who hung the electric lamp onto the thermostat beforehand? Of course it couldn’t be me, Major or Hiro.”

“Ah……”

Facing the dumbfounded me, Alice pointed at the other side of the gap.

“Ayaka is just behind that door.”

“Alice—! Really!”

The metal door suddenly opened, fragments of bricks dropping from the gap. I saw Ayaka clad in her uniform, standing there with her brows raised while placing her hand on the door handle. I couldn’t comprehend the truth all of a sudden.

“Didn’t I tell you not to say it before this!? I am not mentally prepared yet!”

When our gazes met, Ayaka was so embarrassed that her whole face was red. With a ‘bam’, the door was forcefully closed, while Ayaka’s silhouette disappeared without a trace once more.

“E- Erm……! S- Sorry! Th……”

The voice separated by a door felt unusually agitated. It’s Ayaka! So she’s okay?

I truly thought that she disappeared again.

“Where…... did you run off to? Everyone— Everyone was worried of you!”

Alice blocked my path as I was about to rush to the door.

“Sorry for making you look for her here and there. That day……. The day when you and Tetsu had a fight, Ayaka suddenly ran over to the office at late night, and then I kept sheltering her.

Alice…… Actually sheltered Ayaka?

So that’s why she didn’t let me enter the office. But who would have thought that Alice would actually hide someone in the office.

“But why? What in the world happened!?”

“I’m not too sure about this as well. Why don’t you ask her yourself? It was so hard to convince her to go back today, what a relief. She even planned to ask me to bathe every day, what a pain.”

“So…… Which means……” A voice came from the other side of the metal door. “It’s a bit…… Please wait until I’m mentally prepared fir……!”

“No, erm……”

I felt that the reason is absolutely unimportant. Because Ayaka is back already.

“S- Sorry. I won’t disappear without a reason again.”

"Mnn."

"Then it's about time for me to go to the staff office now! I have a lot to explain to the teachers!"

Footsteps rang, and then there was the sound of the metal door at the other side being closed.

Even when the sounds disappeared, I still stood there blankly.

Should I feel happy because of this?

Ayaka is back. Is that true? I underwent a lot of piteous events, but I still understand that happiness can only last for a moment. So if there isn't anyone at the other side of the door, that must be because from the start—

As I was about to extend my hand towards the door handle, my belt was pulled on from my back.

"…… W- What is it?"

"Where are you planning to go to? Are you thinking of leaving me alone here?"

"Ah—"

I originally planned to walk directly to the classroom to wait for Ayaka to come back, but I completely forgot about Alice.

"…… Do you want to go to the classroom with me? Everyone would probably be happy to see you."

"Stop joking! I'm going back. On your primitive transport!"

"Do you want me to teach you how to ride it?"

"Stop the nonsense! Of course you'll be the one riding it!"

Alice frantically hammered my back.

"Really, though you wore a sorrowful expression like you were abandoned by the whole world an hour before this, but you have the energy to make fun of me right now. How dumbfounding."

That's because—

The case ended now, and Ayaka is back as well.

Even though there is no way everything can return to its original state, it's fine as long as she's okay.

"…… Hey, so the detective's task has ended now, right? So shouldn't the promise not to help have ended as well? Should we call Hiro-san here?"

Alice thought for awhile while frowning, and shook her head:

"No, I'm a detective right until I return home." So you're here for a picnic?

"…… If you like riding the bike together so much, I'm fine with that."

"I'm not saying that I like it! There are no shelters, and it would wobble, and your skills are terrible!"

"Then why do you still want to—"

"Shut up! Just hurry up and send me back!"

Alice was so annoyed that her whole face was red, and she frantically pushed on my back with her doll, right until the entrance of the cemetery. What an odd fellow. I would use up a lot of time sending her back to the office and riding back again, but when I said that, Alice gave me the unreasonable request of 'don't wobble, don't ride too quickly, but please ride faster!'

But when the bike continued to go forward, she would hug me silently from the back. So I don't really dislike riding in a pair like this. Whenever the bike accelerates when going down a slope, Alice's trembling could be felt even through the teddy bear, that felt rather fun.

Of course, when we reach Hanamaru Ramen, I would have to accept her rapid fire complaints after she calmed down even slightly.

Chapter 7

In the end, the Gardening Committee still couldn't be reestablished.

On the other hand, the Gardening Club was abolished as well. That was the results that we obtained.

On the Friday a whole week after the Student Council general meeting ended, I finally showed up at the Inspection office during lunch break. As usual, Kousaka-senpai was eating her bento alone in front of the word processing machine in the dark room. As soon as she saw me entering, she shouted 'Fujishima-kun!' and stood up looking rather happy.

"The both of us were busy before this, so it's quite some time before we met, isn't that right?"

"T- That's right…… I should have thanked you properly before this."

"I didn't even do anything. All of it was done by you, Fujishima-kun…… and Kaoruko-chan."

Senpai enthusiastically asked me to sit down, and I had no other alternative but to sit down though I planned to leave quickly. Separated by a bookshelf, hubbub came from the Management office.

"It seems that they're still quite busy."

"Mnn, having a general meeting is hard work, and it's the same with the tidy up work that follows. For me, only five clubs were abolished, so I finished it in a jiffy. Fujishima-kun, you seem to have worked hard as well."

It was only a week after the Student Council's general meeting, but it was still rather unbelievable for me, and felt like a month had already passed.

"No, I'm still fine. The person who's really teaching is Ayaka, after all. Actually, I am utterly clueless about gardening."

And just because of that, I didn't really speak much to Ayaka after meeting at the greenhouse backdoor. But her manner when she was speaking to me in the classroom was rather normal, so she probably didn't avoid me deliberately. She said that she had to prepare herself mentally, but what does that mean?

"Shinozaki-san is a meeting president now."

"Why the strange name?"

I spoke the question that swirled in my mind for quite some time now.

The Gardening Club has disappeared. That's because the minimum number of club members in a club is raised to four in the rules amendment. Though the Gardening Committee can't be reestablished, a mysterious division known as the 'Central Gardening Meeting' appeared. Today is the first day that the division starts its activities officially. The Central Gardening Meeting is formed by a member from each class, while their job is to handle the garden and the plants in the greenhouse. To be precise, it's just the Gardening Committee with another name. But why Meeting? And why Central?

Though I could understand the reason for the change of name. After all, it is a committee that is connected to a death incident before this, and was abolished because of that. So perhaps it's hard to restore it with its original name?

But why the name called 'Central Gardening Meeting'?

"Ah— You're talking about that? The president requested that herself."

"…… Ayaka's request?"

"Mnn. Everyone said that the name was strange, but they didn't have any other suggestions, so the motion was passed. But if you really want to know about the reason, why don't you go ask

Shinozaki-san directly?"

Because she wants to be the meeting presiden— or something like that? She's Ayaka after all……

"Fujishima-kun, it seems that you aren't a member, are you?"

"But of course, Ayaka is the representative for our class, after all."

Being in charge of teaching a bunch of unskilled members how to take care of plants, no other people can do that other than her.

"But is this really okay? Didn't you put in so much effort so that you could undergo club activities with Shinozaki-san?"

"That's not the case."

So what did I want to protect in the end? Since I have to use the words of the deceased to explain this point, I just waved my hands and brushed the matter past.

"It's enough as long as flowers are blooming in the school."

"Really?" Kousaka-senpai shook her head in puzzlement.

"Fujishima-kun—" She suddenly called me when I thanked senpai once again and was about to walk out of the Inspection office.

"What is it?"

"Have you chosen a club yet?"

"Ah— no, not yet."

What should I do? The Gardening Club and the Computer Club had already been abolished, so I have to find a club to join.

"Really? Then let me tell you……"

Kousaka-senpai walked out to the corridors and spoke to me:

"We have a vacancy called the Accounting Inspector, as long as the Inspection wishes for it, you can take the position even without a vote. And we're strongly recruiting right now!"

"Huh?"

"Which means, as long as take part in the Student Council, even if you don't join any club, the teachers won't force you to. For instance, I am not in any club as well...... The 'Central Gardening Meeting' probably has this kind of feeling to it, does it not?"

"So...... Which means......" Is she asking me if I want to join the Inspection?

"That's right! Fujishima-kun, you'll definitely be suited for it!"

"Erm...... But the teachers have their eyes on me already, and I am not too serious, and coupled with the fact that I have my assistant detective part time job, so I might be so busy that I have to skip classes...... So isn't it impossible for me to be in the cadres of the Student Council?"

"You can! Because you're a detective, and you're smart, so let us protect the clubs from the domineering Kaoruko-chan's hands!"

"Who are you calling domineering?"

I turned around and jumped. The person standing by the windows was Kaoruko-senpai. She glared at me with a ferocious gaze as usual, and pushed me away, saying to Kousaka-senpai:

"Seriously. Though you asked me to do all that, you actually don't believe me right until now."

"Be- Because the Inspection and the Management should be taking an opposing stand in theory, needing to keep an eye on the other party. So that's why I think that we must get some new forces for the following battles......"

"Even so, you don't need to let this thing come in and out whenever he likes." The Student Council president pointed at me while saying. I was actually labeled as this thing. It seems like she really hates me a lot.

But I can count as a mature adult now, so I should still thank her.

“Thank you for helping out so much in the general meeting for a thing like me.”

“I didn’t do all that for you.” Kaoruko-senpai wasn’t merciful at all. “Since all of it turned out as you said, so it’s somewhat displeasing.”

That’s right. I really felt like recording the ‘key point’ that Kaoruko-senpai spoke of during the general meeting, giving it to Alice. Letting the opposing party who wants to cut the budget shut up in an instant, causing the atmosphere to change drastically, and allowing the new amendment case pass as well.

As Kousaka-senpai said, it’s all thanks to this person’s help.

But that was Kaoruko-senpai’s choice as well, so maybe I really don’t need to thank her.

Sounds of conversation came from below the window. Kaoruko-senpai looked towards the courtyard, while I followed her gaze and saw Ayaka whose sleeves were rolled up was holding a small spade in the sun bathed garden below the school building opposite to us. On the other hand, beside her was Sayuri-senpai, now the advisor of the Central Gardening Meeting, who was wearing a shirt and a tight fitting skirt, helping to tidy up the courtyard with that careless attire.

The target that the deceased and the living sacrificed a lot to protect.

I think that it was not any person or not any place, but a warm feeling like this.

Because of that, I sneaked a peek by my side. Some gentleness showed from Kaoruko-senpai’s gaze while she looked at Sayuri-sensei’s back at that moment; while Kousaka-senpai who didn’t know anything just looked curious.

*

Though it was quite early when I reached Hanamaru Ramen, the shop was already quite crowded.

“Min-san, Min-san. Please give me a bottle of Kubota’s Manjuu sake! I’m going to drink a liter with Major!”

“No no no, Hiro-san. We should have a bottle of champagne at these times, and it must be pink.”

“All the champagnes in the shop are used for ice creams, not for your consumption!”

“Hey, why don’t you let me drink a little? I lost to Narumi in the end, so that’s a good reason.”

“Tetsu, since you lost to the Gardening Club kid, that means your position is lower than me by two levels.”

“What are you talking about!? Get out!”

“I’m betting ten thousand on Yondaime.”

“Me too, me too. Twenty thousand on Yondaime.”

“Why isn’t anyone betting on me!”

“Because Tetsu is even weaker than Narumi-kun.”

“Hiro, get over here as well! I’ll let you be unable to speak foreve—“

“What are you guys doing……?”

Poking my head into the alley, I was lazy to even say anything more.

Hiro-san, Major, Yondaime and Tetsu-senpai. The four of them surrounded the wooden stand used as a table, while a large amount of sake bottles were already on it.

“Ohhh, you’re here, Vice Admiral Fujishijma? Then let us drink a toast to Vice Admiral Fujishima!”

“Cheers!” Only Hiro-san and Major raised their glasses. On the other hand, Tetsu-senpai glared at me with an expression that looked as though he wanted to pounce on me, making me feel like turning right quickly and leaving the place.”

“What are you doing, Gardening Club kid! Where are you going?”

As Yondaime called me, I was unable to slip away.

“…… Well…… Is there anything wrong? Why are you drinking in broad daylight?”

“The members of Hirasaka-gumi originally weren’t willing to pay up their debts, so Hiro-san and I sold the debt to Yondaime with a twenty percent discount. It’s better for us as we saved the trouble of collecting the money from them.”

“And of course, I collected the money immediately.” The smile of a carnivore appeared on Yondaime’s face. That’s scary……

I remember that Hiro-san and Major both had a huge profit out of the gamble during Tetsu-senpai and my battle. It’s just that I didn’t dare to ask them how much profit they had…… It just feels as though they’re going to drink all of the money away today.

“Oi, Narumi! Have another fight with me!” Tetsu-senpai moaned.

“I’m not having another fight even if I die!”

“What are you talking about!? Are you trying to run away right after you win?”

Is there anything wrong with that!? You don’t have so much as a scratch on you though you lost, while there are still a whole lot of injuries and bruises on me right now!

“Tetsu, just give up. You’ll be a loser forever.” As Yondaime was still fanning the flames of Tetsu-senpai’s fury, Tetsu-senpai nearly rushed over to me. If there weren’t any sake bottles on the table, things might just turn out like that.

“Narumi-kun, aren’t you still injured? Maybe next time!”

What do you mean next time!? I won't do something like this again, ever!

"Then why don't you just battle in a way that you won't get hurt? Vice Admiral Fujishima, you can just battle using dices."

"I'm not really good at dice."

"Oi oi oi, you aren't lacking the confidence to win against my brother in a game of luck, are you?"

Yondaime, please don't annoy Tetsu-senpai anymore.

"Narumi, sit down! Min-san, please lend us a bowl!"

Senpai didn't even drink any sake, but his expression was extremely vicious when he held the three dice. Please, I don't want to play anymore!

"It's okay, Gardening Club kid, just play. Didn't Alice just give you your wages?"

"Yeah, Narumi-kun. Just sit down for awhile."

"Don't worry, Hiro-san and I will join this as well."

"What do you mean don't worry!? This obviously raises the risks!"

I was flanked to the seats of the emergency stairs and was forced to sit down.

"Let's decide who's going to be the dealer." After saying that, Tetsu-senpai immediately tossed the dice into the bowl.

For some reason, I won each and every time. After an hour, my wallet bulged to an unbelievable extent. And I almost never touched the wages that Alice gave me.

As Yondaime lost too badly, he left halfway. On the other hand, Major and Hiro-san had a large blow because of the loss, and rapidly finished the sake, and were lying down, being asleep on the table. Though it was only five in the evening.

The one who was still okay was the green-faced me who kept getting four, five and sixes and leopards, and Tetsu-senpai who didn't even drink a drop of sake.

"Narumi, why won't you lose even in dice……?"

"No…… I don't know."

It feels like I'll just go bankrupt at a certain time. That's so scary, I don't think I want to continue.

"Whatever, I get it now, I'm a loser, while you're really strong."

Senpai sighed at the sky, lying down on the cement floor below the emergency backstairs. It felt like senpai was saying that sincerely, making me unable to meet his gaze.

Because I used a cowardly way to attain victory.

"Don't worry about that. You should really learn more despicable things. It's the same in dice. Since you're winning already, isn't that fine? Be happy. If you really do mind, then just treat these people. If we were really people who cared about the wins and losses in gambling between companions, we wouldn't have became NEETs."

Senpai stared at the sky while saying. Things might be so.

Even if those things happened, senpai would still fool around with me as though nothing happened. As Min-san said, the damp warmth and casualness in this back alley is the strong point in my world.

But I still can't handle them carelessly. That's why I gazed at the same sky as Tetsu-senpai while saying:

"Sayuri-sensei, she's the adviser for the newly formed Gardening Committee as well."

"…… Yeah."

Senpai answered blurrily.

"The Student Council president— she's actually Hayano Tomohiko's sister. She put in a lot of effort for this. The greenhouse and the flowerbeds are well kept, and Ayaka is teaching everyone about gardening right now. That's why……"

That's why— what? What should I tell Tetsu-senpai?

It's actually quite simple. The Ayaka in my memories once told me: Fujishima-kun, you can do it as well. Shout when you're angry like the others, laugh when you're happy like the others and speak when there's something when you want.

But Ayaka, this matter really isn't that simple.

When I was about to lose consciousness because of the inability to say anything, Tetsu-senpai lightly punched the side of my belly. I know it, idiot. His fist seemed to say that.

So I continued to lie down on the cement ground as well, allowing the words to drift in the air. It's quite unusual that there's a sunny day in the monsoon season, the blue skies giving people an exceptionally piercing feeling.

"W- w- wow, what is with this!?"

A voice suddenly came, startling me into jump and raise my head. A silhouette wearing the sailor uniform of our school was at the end of the alley. Short hair that was near the color of coffee, hair that was pinned up one side using a pin, friendly eyes below determined brows…… It was a familiar face that still made people feel nostalgic.

"Min-san, Min-san, the four of them are all drunk! Really, the shop hasn't even opened!"

The door opened as Ayaka spoke to the kitchen backdoor. Min-san glanced at the four of us corpses.

"Ayaka, throw these guys into flammable materials before you wash your hands. And please wash the sake bottles as well."

"It's the different for the others, but if we throw Mukai-san into flammable material, wouldn't that cause a chain explosion?"

Mukai is actually Major's real name, and the only person who would call him that is Ayaka.

…… Eh?

Doesn't this feel a bit odd? Ayaka noticed me crawling up slowly, and she started to speak to me while unsteadily holding the sake bottles, causing the odd feeling to fade.

"Really— It's so tiring! There are twenty four people in the Gardening Meeting in total! It's hard to teach them all in one day, and there's a lot that I don't understand about the greenhouse as well……"

"Ah……. Hey, that's right."

I suddenly recalled what Kousaka-senpai said, so I asked Ayaka while raising my upper torso.

"Why did you name it the Central Gardening Meeting?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's because……"

Ayaka stammered while answering, a shy smile on her face. She continued for hesitating for a moment:

"It's the Central Gardening Meeting in English, right? That would be the CGM. Fujishima-kun, look. I'm planning to use the armband that you made again. I think the amount should be insufficient, so can you please make some more?"

Ahhh, so that's why. It's the armband. As Ayaka's tone was too natural, I nearly lied down without a second thought.

"…… Ah, Ayaka?"

As I was planning to stand up, Ayaka was about to walk into the kitchen backdoor, her hand full of sake bottles. "Min-san, where should I put these?" "Just put them in the corridors for now!" "Understood~" something like that came from the other side of the door. I stopped my hand that I was about to open the door with.

Ayaka— What did she call me just now?

I squatted down on the cement floor, reconfirming it in slight fear. It felt as though the miracle would vanish if I open the kitchen backdoor and see Ayaka's face.

Perhaps Ayaka's memories had recovered? Because she called Major with his real name just now as well.

No no, even so……

This is too strange. If her memories had recovered, if Ayaka really remembered about everyone—

She should know that the words on the armband should be read from in to out: MGC.

Then…… So this is what it means?

The things that was lost, damaged and hurt did not change, but we're still by each other's side right now, so that's why we act like we did before, gradually getting closer once more.

That's all.

The door before my eyes opened once more.

"Fujishima-kun, this……"

Ayaka did call me that, and handed me a tray with a large bowl on it.

"This is for Alice."

Even after I took the tray, I still stared at Ayaka's familiar but nostalgic face. As the door was about to close, I unconsciously called her.

"…… What is it?"

Ayaka shyly poked out her head from a small slit. I really didn't know what to say. The thing that I wanted to say in my mind was probably ‘Shout when you’re angry like the others, laugh when you’re happy like the others and speak up if you want something.’ But the words that came out after some effort was—

“You haven’t told me why you hid at Alice’s place, have you?”

Ayaka widened her eyes, and narrowed the slit even more.

“That’s because……!” She suddenly said in a startlingly loud voice, and lowered her volume once again.

“W- Why do you want to know of secrets between girls so much!?”

“What secret……” Did something happen with Alice?

“It’s— Erm……” To hide her embarrassment, Ayaka kept opening and closing the door. “I heard a lot from Alice, like things about you, Fujishima-kun, and things about the companions at Hanamaru Ramen……”

About me?

Ayaka suddenly opened the door and said:

“Be— Because you know a lot about me, but I don’t know anything about you, that’s very unfair. And I can only ask Alice about this— Why are you forcing me to say all this!?”

Two whole days. So they were just talking about all this?

Was it to search for the her before she lost her memories?

“I’m telling you that it’s not that!” Even her ears reddened. “Fujishima-kun, why do you make things so complicated each time? Fujishima-kun, I just want to be more……”

“Eh, ah? S- Sorry……”

Ayaka is right. No matter how her memories of the past are, we actually don’t need to think so much about this.

It’s okay as long as the distance between the two is shortened. I was facing Ayaka, while Ayaka was facing me. We were getting closer step by step. That’s why we’re standing at a place where we could touch each other by extending our hands right now.

My left hand holding the tray, I tried to extend my right hand to Ayaka in reality; Ayaka cautiously extended her left hand in response. It seemed that our fingertips lightly touched each other.

What should I say? I finally spoke after thinking for a long time:

“…… Welcome back.”

With a shy smile on her face, Ayaka answered: “I’m back.”

After seeing the kitchen backdoor close, I walked towards the emergency backstairs.

Ayaka found her answer through Alice. If so, there’s only a last bit of uneasiness left.

“I heard that the Gardening Committee is starting its activities from today, is that right?”

While moving the onions into her mouth with her chopsticks, Alice gushed them down with Dr. Pepper. For some reason, she kept facing me with her back, and ate while staring at the innermost monitor in the room. Perhaps I’m thinking too much? It seemed that most of the dolls on the bed had their backs to me as well, and the air conditioning was terribly cold.

“Ahhh, yeah. Though the name isn’t the same.”

“Is that so. Then we can say that the case is closed this time, isn’t that right?”

“Yeah.”

I thought to myself, why is she unwilling to look over here?

But I just couldn’t ask her. Since Ayaka and Alice talked for two whole days, perhaps not only did Ayaka ask Alice about a lot of things, Alice might have asked Ayaka about something as well?

I prepared the second can of Dr. Pepper and sat at the end of the bed, closely listening to the continuous sounds of typing. To be frank, I really didn't know how to ask as well.

"Are you feeling uneasy?"

Alice asked without turning her head around.

"…… Uneasy about what?"

"It's nothing, Ayaka still can't remember anything."

I thought about the words that Alice said. Does that really count as 'nothing'? I don't know.

"So I'm telling you that the mystery already sank into the deep sea, to a place that I cannot touch."

In the incident that happened during winter, the thing that pushed Alice. 'Why did Ayaka jump down from the school rooftop?'

The answer was already lost before the truth was converted to facts.

"Also, you probably don't need the answer of that incident as well. You'll know when you look at Ayaka right now."

I thought to myself, this girl really did change a bit.

Before this, she wasn't afraid of hurting anyone just to convert the truth to facts— a detective that wouldn't mind even if she harms herself.

"So the contract that I had with you ends here."

I really wanted to know how Alice's expression was that time. The contract. The reason that I became an assistant detective was to pay off my debt for hiring Alice , while the time was until Alice found out the truth. And everything ended already now.

Because Alice gave up. Because Alice found an answer through Ayaka as well.

I— don’t have a reason to stay here anymore.

Alice finally stopped her movements of pounding on the keyboard, moving the moveable desk with the tray on it aside, and turned around to look at me. She covered the lower part of her face with the small teddy bear on her chest, stars sparkled in her eyes.

“Alice, do you think that this is okay?”

I asked the question unconsciously.

“What do you mean is this okay?”

Bewilderment could be seen in her eyes.

“Do you think that I would feel pity because of losing a useless assistant like you!? Don’t be so full of yourself, I’m now repenting for giving a person who only knows how to serve Dr. Pepper such a high salary! Dumb and blunt, with bad riding skills, having a lot of complaints, and even letting yourself get hurt without consulting other people! Being so blunt that you aren’t aware of what I’m thinking about, asking Major to make a robot might be better than yo—“

“Erm…… Sorry for my bluntness. So…… Alice, what are you thinking about?”

“It doesn’t matter now! The contract is over anyways!”

Alice was in a fit of fury on her bed, and was so angry that her whole face was red, while her hair was so messy that it was like a typhoon just passed by. Err…… She seems really angry. But not even knowing the reason for her anger, I’m really an unbelievably dumb person.

So what should I do?

“Anyways! I’m collecting payment from you this time. Don’t you have cash on you? I've just given you your salary."

"Eh? Ah, mnn."

I weakly extended my hand towards my back pocket. The cash in my wallet was so much that it almost overflowed.

I even thought that I helped Alice at least a little. Though compared with the detective's ability, my ability was a far cry from hers, but I just felt that I might be able to help her, albeit a little, if I stayed by her side.

But those were just my thoughts— when was that? My promise to Alice to 'keep staying by her side', but was harshly scolded by her. Ahh, that's right. I finally understood. What Alice thinks is absolutely not important at all.

I am the one who wants to stay by Alice's side.

I want to continue to be an assistant detective but it is ending now, so I feel an inexplicable uneasiness and loneliness.

I suddenly thought of something and then I stuffed my wallet back again.

"Erm…… I played dice with them just now."

Alice frowned. I swallowed before continuing:

"I lost terribly. I lost all of the money you gave me, so I can't pay you. So—"

The detective's expression changed drastically, and she tried to use the small teddy in her hands to cover her face.

"I'll be your assistant detective to pay for that again. Is that…… okay?"

Alice was speechless. After a moment, at a place slightly above the doll's head, the stars in the two eyes started to waver. After that, she swayed her long hair, having her back to me yet again. After that, there came the thorned words:

“Unbelievable! I let you experience the normal relationship between a superior and a staff so that you won’t become a NEET, and in the end you’re telling me that you lost all of it!? You’re really a hopeless NEET from your bones. I will never hand you a large amount of money ever again!”

“S- Sorr……”

Eh? What was the last sentence she said?

“That’s fine as well. I will let you know how terrible it is to owe me two favors. I will torture you with a meager salary that would make you want to be a communist forever, so you’d better prepare yourself!”

I was so happy that I jumped, and almost fell as well. I barely supported myself by using the side of the bed.

“Erm…… Thank you! This— I— Really……”

“Then go to the Lawson Supermarket and buy two crates of Dr. Pepper first. Didn’t I often tell you before this, remember to stock up when there are less than a dozen left? How many times do I have to tell you!”

Alice continued to say without turning back. I was so happy that I couldn’t say a thing, and I still looked back repeatedly at the pajamas clad silhouette.

After walking out of the door and wearing my shoes, I saw a tiny shadow hung below the rain shelter when I was about to stand up. That was one of the surveillance cameras that Alice set up throughout this building.

A surveillance camera. I nearly cried out loud.

Alice should have seen that through her monitors. Seeing Hiro-san, Major, Yondaime, Tetsu-senpai and I play dices, and the fact that I won spectacularly. Having evidence of my lies, she—

I looked back.

The words on the signboard hung outside the NEET Detective Agency came into my eyes.

`This is the only thing worth trying.`

`It’s the only NEET thing to do.`

Though that wasn’t really a good way.

I don’t know why Alice didn’t expose my lie as well.

But to me, this is the only thing worth trying, while Alice is still by my side right now.

Though it’s impossible for everything to recover its original state, even so—

We must still work hard to live on, continuing to walk forwards with our own feet.

So isn’t this fine already?

I used my fingers to draw on the words on the signboard. These words don’t have any warmth, and are not the words of the dead. They were the words of life that she wrote in fresh blood.

Neither truth nor lies, the form of happiness, despair and reality—

This is Alice’s story.

Afterword

A few days ago, it was my second time paying my personal taxes—after writing that, I found that this is almost the same thing that I wrote in the afterword of the second book. And that means, all of you readers waited a whole year, I'm very sorry.

A lot happened this year. Moving…… Moving…… Err…… And moving. I thought that I might feel a lot of regret as I had to say farewell to my house that I lived at for eight years, but that kind of feeling did not occur to me after I moved out. Maybe I'm just this kind of cold-blooded person?

In the room that I lived for eight years, the wallpapers on the wall were already badly torn. Being able to dig out a lot of treasures when I was packing made me feel that it was interesting as well. For example, a mummified insect (thrown away), a poem collection that I read before this (thrown away immediately without hesitation). Actually, it's better not to touch these things that had been hidden for so many years already, the world would be more peaceful like this.

The structure of this story was actually buried in my computer for quite a long time. Probably during summer last year, I suddenly thought about the structure of the story, as for what I did after that…… The people who knows probably knows, throwing 'Kamimemo' aside, writing another story. So sorry……

Thus, when my editor said that I should write the third book, I was shocked because of the story structure that I sent there. Because there wasn't even a solution in the contents. This was written on the email that I sent that time: 'Just like the first book, I wish to listen to everyone's thoughts after I finished the whole draft, so only the solution wasn't written.' And there was a lot of excuses as well. Hikaru Sugii half a year ago, what are you doing? Why didn't you finish it! Or perhaps you just didn't have the inspiration that time? Seeing the title of 'A interweaving complex past, a nervous exciting school mystery' that I wrote, it was quite annoying!

But I must explain a bit (Though I'm not sure who I'm explaining to), a proposal is probably something like this, bluffs. If I'm a person that could predict the pain after I write, I don't need to be a NEET at all.

Because of that, the later half of the January this year was just like hell. And the only consolation was that other fellow novelists are experiencing a more terrible hell at the same workplace.

To sculpt Ayaka's story again, Yuasa-sama who patiently changed the draft with me, and the illustrator Kishida Mel-sensei who loves Ayaka far more than me and is waiting for her return, I use this chance to express my deepest thanks. Thank you very much.

February 2008. Hikaru Sugii.